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HOUDINI

His Life-Story

Photos property of B. M. L. Ernst.

DIFFICULT ESCAPES. *Left:* FROM A CELL. *Right:* GERMANY, 1901.

HOUDINI

His Life-Story by HAROLD KELLOCK
from the recollections and documents of

BEATRICE HOUDINI

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To

BERNARD M. L. ERNST

HOUDINI'S DEAREST FRIEND

AND ADVISER

FOREWORD

HOUDINI left behind him very complete biographical material in the form of diaries covering the last three decades of his life, many autobiographical fragments, letters, volumes of clippings, references, special articles, programs, playbills, and much revelatory matter in the various books and pamphlets from his pen. These data are supplemented and enriched by the storage of memories he left in the mind of his wife, who was his constant companion during all his work and play for thirty-three years. Harry and Beatrice Houdini were married ten days after they met, when he was nineteen and she barely eighteen, and thereafter they were never separated except on two or three occasions and then for only a few days at a time.

This biography is prepared from the data and records mentioned above, and from the recollections of Beatrice Houdini. The bulk of the research and collation of material was the work of Miss Katharine Hayes Amend.

While in general the secrets of magic are carefully guarded among those who practice the art, the author has been able to give intimate glimpses of Houdini's methods and to reveal the inner workings of a number of his major mystifications which were his alone.

HOUDINI

I

HOUDINI began his career with a traveling circus at the age of nine, in the Middle West, and his first trick, which he had perfected laboriously in secret in the family woodshed, was to pick up needles with his eyelids while suspended by the heels head downward. From this humble early beginning it was a far cry and for many years a laborious struggle to the rôle of the master magician who thrilled and amazed great audiences everywhere with his daredevil feats, his unsurpassed dexterity, his almost superhuman physical endurance, his mystifying escapes from manacles, strait-jackets, prison cells, sealed chambers, chests and casks of every kind, from his famous Chinese water-torture cell, from a living grave six feet in the earth, and from a heavy packing case, carefully nailed together by experts, weighted, and tossed into the sea. When he died, in Detroit, October 31, 1926, at the age of fifty-two, he had been a public performer for forty-three years.

Hundreds of thousands of persons in various cities have seen Houdini, stripped and securely handcuffed by police experts, leap from some bridge or boat into a stream or harbor, on some occasions in weather so cold that a hole had to be cut in the ice before he could jump, and have seen him emerge again, within two minutes, free and smiling. Other hundreds of thousands have seen him incased in a police strait-jacket, and thus securely trussed,

suspended, head downward, by a block and tackle outside some public building, and have watched him free himself within a few minutes. Scores of thousands more have observed him, on the stage of the New York Hippodrome, perform the most ambitious vanishing stunt ever undertaken by any conjurer. Before them on the stage, directly over the big Hippodrome tank containing a quarter of a million gallons of water, stood a five-ton elephant, swaying heavily in the spotlight, and almost in an instant, behold! that huge mass of living flesh had disappeared and the big stage was empty, save only for the smiling, nonchalant showman. Finally, in all the larger cities in America and in many of the principal European capitals Houdini mystified the public authorities by his jail-breaking demonstrations. After permitting the police to strip him, cover him with manacles, and lock him in their securest cell in their best-ordered jail, in a few minutes he would walk into the office of the warden or police chief, free and fully clothed, the elaborate shackles dangling loose in his hands.

What was the secret of these feats of wonder? His art really included manifold secrets, and very largely the details of these must rest in the grave with him. Only one person, his wife, was in his confidence, and in certain matters she was pledged to secrecy. In a general way, however, Houdini on occasion would frankly discuss his methods with his few intimates. His great secret, in fact, had a double key.

"My chief task has been to conquer fear," he said.

"When I am stripped and manacled, nailed securely within a weighted packing case and thrown into the sea, or when I am buried alive under six feet of earth, it is necessary to preserve absolute serenity of spirit. I have to work with great delicacy and lightning speed. If I grow panicky I am lost. And if something goes wrong, if there is some little accident or mishap, some slight miscalculation, I am lost unless all my faculties are working on high, free from mental tension or strain. The public sees only the thrill of the accomplished trick; they have no conception of the tortuous preliminary self-training that was necessary to conquer fear.

"My second secret has been, by equally vigorous self-training, to enable me to do remarkable things with my body, to make not one muscle or a group of muscles, but *every* muscle, a responsive worker, quick and sure for its part, to make my fingers super-fingers in dexterity, and to train my toes to do the work of fingers."

This double spiritual and physical training was the foundation of his art. In his case, also, genius consisted of an infinite capacity for taking pains.

Intimate visitors to Houdini's home had glimpses of this infinite capacity. Seated conversing with friends, he would absently take a pack of cards from his pocket and for half an hour or an hour would exercise his fingers in manipulation, making certain cards appear at the top of the pack when they seemed hopelessly shuffled, all the time conversing on a wide range of subjects and paying not the least attention to the cards or his sensitive and

agile fingers. "I have to keep in practice to do things like this mechanically, like walking or breathing," he explained once to a friend who inquired the reason for this intermittent exercise. On other occasions he would take a length of string from his pocket, tie it in various sorts of knots, and drop it on the floor. Presently his visitor might observe that Houdini had unobtrusively slipped off his shoes and socks and was untying and retying the knots with his toes, meanwhile never so much as glancing at his own remarkable manipulations.

His training for his various immersion stunts and for feats such as remaining encased in a sealed casket under water for an hour and a half was peculiarly arduous. For months on end, several times a day, he would practice going under water in his own bathtub, holding a stopwatch to test his endurance, lengthening the period of immersion each day until he could stay under for more than four minutes without grave discomfort. His high record was four minutes, sixteen seconds, in a public test. For hours at a time he would practice slow-breathing exercises, accustoming himself to get along with a minimum of oxygen, so that he could feed his lungs sparingly with the few cubic feet of air in a little casket and endure for an almost unbelievable time. It is safe to say that no human being could compete with Houdini in keeping himself alive, on occasion, with hardly enough oxygen to suffice a mouse.

On tour, with cold weather approaching, he would take matutinal cold baths, a little icier each morning, to prepare

himself for his stunt of being pushed overboard handcuffed in chilling waters and freeing himself on the bottom. His diaries record the stages of this Spartan preparation. Typical are the successive entries in January, 1907. They run: "*Jan. 7.* Gee whiz! Another ice bath. They want to see me earn my money.—*Jan. 9.* Took cold bath, 49 deg.—*Jan. 10.* Took cold bath, 48 deg. Doctor stops ice bath.—*Jan. 16.* Cold bath, 40 deg. Gee, it's cold. —*Jan. 18.* Taking icy baths to get ready for bridge jump. Water about 36 deg."

On more than one occasion his training in complete mental serenity under the most critical circumstances saved his life.

One conspicuous instance occurred in Detroit, where he had a fortnight's engagement at the beginning of the winter of 1906. In accordance with his usual custom of giving a free public thriller to excite interest in his show, he arranged to be hurled, handcuffed, into the Detroit River from the Belle Isle bridge during one of the first days of his engagement. When the morning arrived the manager of the theater called him up to report that the river was frozen solid, and the stunt, therefore, could not be performed.

"The public will think you were four-flushing," he said. "Can't you do something else that will go just as big?"

"What's the matter with the river stunt?" Houdini came back. "Can't you get some one to saw a hole in the ice under the bridge? That will be all right with me."

Accordingly a large open space was cleared in the river ice, and at the appointed time Houdini made his way through the throng of thousands that had gathered on bridge and shore in the bitter north wind. Mrs. Houdini was not with him that day, though almost invariably she accompanied him to the scene of his public thrillers. She had a bad cold, was running a temperature, and was forbidden to leave her bed in the hotel. There she fretted, in great discomfort of mind, listening to the north wind whining across the roofs and thinking of Houdini in the icy river. The water stunts were the bane of her life anyway, for she more than any one except Houdini himself knew the risks he was taking. Moreover, she had to conceal her terror over these daredevil performances, because she knew she must do nothing to damage his morale. She remembers kissing him gayly as he went off to the bridge, though her heart ached with fear.

At the bridge he stripped to bathing trunks, was carefully manacled by policemen, exchanged a little banter with newspaper friends, and, by his own instructions, was pushed off the parapet of the bridge and vanished with a splash into the icy water.

On such occasions Houdini always had with him in the crowd a skilled under-water man as a sort of aqueous life-insurance. This man had a rope with him, and his instructions were, if Houdini did not appear by the end of the third minute, to make the rope fast, toss over the free end, and go down and get him. Of course the presence of this emergency man was not generally advertised.

Usually, on such occasions, Houdini reappeared in a little over a minute. This time two minutes passed, then three. The rope man was slow with his rope. It took a lot of courage deliberately to let oneself down into that black hole in the ice. Possibly his hands were already numbed with cold and he had difficulty in getting his rope ready.

The time went on. At the end of four minutes the police surgeons and other physicians who had been invited to witness the performance expressed the opinion that some mishap had occurred and Houdini had done his last stunt. The newspaper men began sending off messengers with hasty bulletins to their papers. They and the doctors, with occasional glances at their watches, kept their eyes glued on that black hole in the ice, and in the big crowd, in which a low murmur of dismay was growing, thousands of eyes were fixed on that spot.

Finally the rope splashed into the water. A terribly frightened diver started to climb down. But before he got under way Houdini's head and arm flashed out of the water, and the next instant he was supporting himself by the rope on the surface of the stream. He had been under water eight minutes!

Back in the hotel Mrs. Houdini was lying uneasily in bed when she heard newsboys crying in the street.

"Quick, open the window wide," she said to her attendant, and suddenly the cries became clear: "Extree! Extree! Houdini dead!" "Extree! Houdini drowned in river."

She hurried the woman out to get a paper, and the next

few minutes were the most desolate of her experience. But when the woman returned, Houdini himself burst in close behind her. His head was still dripping, and he was blue with cold, but he was alive.

After he had a hot bath and a rub-down, and some steaming tea, he told his wife the story.

"I reached the bottom and freed myself quickly as usual," he said, "but there must have been more current than I calculated, for when I came up there was solid ice above me, and I couldn't locate the hole. I went down again and looked, and I swam about under water a little, but that confounded hole had vanished as if it had suddenly frozen over—and after a little, I began to need air. That bothered me, but I got an idea. I let myself come up gently, and sure enough my idea was a good one. Between the surface of the water and the under surface of the ice was a little air space, about half an inch wide. By lying on my back and poking my nose into this gently, I could fill my lungs.

"Of course this wasn't too easy. If I drew in water with the air I'd take to choking, and then—well, I didn't think about it. I'd get a little air, and then navigate around a bit looking for that damned hole, and then I'd have to get another breath. I couldn't see much anyway, and it wasn't so warm down there.

"After what seemed about an hour, I saw the rope flash into the water, not very far away, and you bet I made for it. That was that."

Sometimes, in rare moments of confidence, Houdini

would give an intimate friend a fleeting glimpse of his technique. Late one afternoon, at the office of his attorney, some months before Houdini's last illness, in the interval of waiting for some legal papers, the talk turned on the opening of safes, and the lawyer asked if it was really true that Houdini could open any safe.

"Yes," said Houdini. "If every one knew what I know about safes, safes wouldn't be worth very much. I sometimes wonder at the possible consequences if a clever hypnotist should get hold of me, and dig out my secrets about safes, and pass them on to persons in the underworld. But it is a remote danger. I don't believe they would know how to apply the secrets, even if they heard them.

"When I was a youngster in petticoats locks had a fascination for me. As I grew up I worked with various locksmiths. The study of locks led to the study of all sorts of locking appliances. In this connection I took up physics, even dipped into chemistry a bit. You know five hours is a full night's sleep for me. I can do with less. It's remarkable what a lot of work a fellow can get done during those three extra hours while the rest of the world is in bed. It's nearly eleven hundred extra hours a year. Maybe that's one of the reasons I am the Great Houdini instead of a sideshow piker."

"Can you open our office safe?" asked the lawyer presently.

"If you give me three minutes alone with it, I'll try," said Houdini. "But first let's make sure it's locked. It isn't any trick to open a safe that isn't locked."

The safe was a large Herring-Hall-Marvin affair, such as is used as a repository for wills and other precious papers in a large law office. It had been locked for the night. The lawyer left Houdini in front of it, and retired to his private office. In a few minutes Houdini summoned him. He walked up to the safe, without hesitation turned the knob to the proper combination, and the big steel door swung open.

Back in the inner office, Houdini, on a sudden impulse, said: "I'll show you the secret. No one has seen it before."

He took from his waistcoat pocket something that resembled the case of a watch, save that within was a single sensitive dial instead of the two fixed hands.

"I made this myself," he said. "It is the only one in the world. If you knew what it meant, and how to use it, it would give you the combination of any safe anywhere."

He slipped it back into his pocket.

The two men left the office together. It was in a large building stretching to two streets, with entrances on both, the rear entrance being closed after 6:30 at night. Absent-mindedly, after they left the elevator, the lawyer led the way toward the rear entrance, but as they reached it he saw that the heavy, burglar-proof locking apparatus had been set and the doors were closed for the night.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning. "We'll have to use the other exit."

He took a few paces, continuing the conversation, when suddenly he noticed that Houdini was no longer by his

side. He turned back just as Houdini was starting to call him.

Houdini stood holding the "burglar-proof" door open, grinning like an urchin.

"What's the matter with this exit?" he asked naïvely. "It opens all right."

They passed into the street, and then Houdini stooped over the lock a minute.

"I'd better leave this the way I found it, or your office might be robbed in the night," he remarked. A few turns of his wrist, and the lock was adjusted again.

By a curious irony of fate, after Houdini died no record could be found of the combination of his own private safe in his home, and no one could open it. On a certain day it became necessary, rather unexpectedly, to secure immediately certain papers locked in that enigmatic safe. It was Election Day, a holiday, and the office of the makers of the safe did not respond to the telephone when an attempt was made to get them to send professional aid. Finally, through some roundabout inquiries, a retired expert cracksman was secured. He labored for half a day over a problem which Houdini could have solved, in the case of a strange safe, on the instant. Finally he had to blow the thing open. If Houdini were looking down on that sweating cracksman, he surely had a full appreciation of the situation. . . .

Magic is almost as old, apparently, as man. In primitive times the sleight-of-hand artist found a credulous audience, and easily preyed on the wonder and fear of his

tribal mates for his own elevation. He pretended to control both good and evil spirits and thus secured for himself the prerogatives and emoluments of a supernatural being. Up to fairly recent times the most reputable magicians did not disdain to permit the humble folk to believe that they had supernatural aid, or even that they occasionally received counsel from Beelzebub himself. The elaborate gimcrack apparatus, the peaked hat, and the decorative flowing robes affected by the old-time magicians lent color to this common belief, and the robes were also useful for making objects appear or vanish unexpectedly.

For hundreds of years crowds gaped at performers who could swallow fire, glass, or swords, who could walk on red-hot coals, sit serenely in a burning cage, tread unharmed on broken glass, or mount a ladder of swords. These things sound like marvels; in fact they are very simple, quite in the elementary grades of magic. No supernatural aid is needed for such feats. In one of his books, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods*, Houdini gave comprehensive descriptions of the various methods of accomplishing these seeming miracles. Some of them are not without risk, but they are normally safe enough for the seasoned performer.

During the past century the higher-grade magicians have steadily shown a tendency to disavow all claims to supernatural aid and to stand on their own feet as artists. The flowing robes and the superfluous hocus-pocus have been discarded. The profession has gained correspondingly

in dignity and public favor. Houdini was surely the most explicit and painstaking of magicians in explaining that his magic had no supernatural attachments.

Mrs. Houdini writes:

"When Houdini made a five-ton elephant vanish from the stage of the Hippodrome, that was a trick and only a trick. I know how it was done, and I saw every step of the arduous months of planning and preparation that made it possible. No demons or angels whisked the elephant away, and, I may add, there was no trap door, nor was the trap door possible with a huge tank of water just beneath the stage floor.

"When, on the same stage, Houdini would swallow, or seem to swallow, a large spoolful of thread and a dozen packages of needles, and would subsequently draw the thread out of his mouth with the needles strung on it at intervals, until two hundred threaded needles from his mouth were stretched on a hundred feet of thread across the stage—that also was a trick and only a trick. I know how it was done, and I was with Houdini when he discovered the germ of it in an old book of magic picked up in a second-hand bookshop in London. No visitor from the other world imparted the knowledge.

"When Houdini escaped from every sort of manacling device, from every sort of prison cell, from every sort of cask and chest and packing case devised by experts and nailed up and sealed by them, these things were tricks and tricks only. They were performed as the result of long forethought and skill, and persistent, arduous training,

by a man of steel nerves, but there was no supernatural agency involved."

Despite Houdini's constant disavowals a legend persists among many simple people that he exercised peculiar psychic powers. The legend was assisted by statements of fraudulent mediums, exposed by Houdini, who would assert, after he had duplicated their feats, that he also possessed psychic powers which he was either unaware of or deliberately chose to conceal. That honest believer in so-called psychic manifestations, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was Houdini's good friend in spite of their disagreement about spiritualism, insisted that Houdini's skill was largely supernatural.

"My dear chap," he wrote during one of Houdini's tours in England, "why go round the world seeking a demonstration of the occult when you are giving one all the time? Mrs. Guppy could dematerialize and so could many folk in Holy Writ, and I do honestly believe that you can also. My reason tells me that you have this wonderful power, though I have no doubt that up to a point your strength and skill avail you."

To the end of his days Houdini was unable to shake Sir Arthur's conviction.

J. Hewat McKenzie, President of the British College of Psychic Science, in his book entitled *Spirit Intercourse*, was equally emphatic.

"Houdini . . . is enabled by psychic power (though this he does not advertise) to open any lock, handcuff, or bolt that is submitted to him," he wrote. "He has been im-

prisoned within heavily barred cells, doubly and trebly locked, and from them all he escaped with ease. This ability to unbolt locked doors is undoubtedly due to his mediumistic powers, and not to any normal mechanical operation on the lock. The force necessary to shoot a bolt within a lock is drawn from Houdini the medium, but it must not be thought that this is the only means by which he can escape from his prison, for at times his body has been dematerialized and withdrawn."

Houdini's reply to this was explicit. He wrote:

"I do claim to free myself from the restraint of fetters and confinement, but positively state that I accomplish my purpose purely by physical, not psychical means. My methods are perfectly natural, resting on natural laws of physics. I do not *dematerialize* or *materialize* anything; I simply control and manipulate material things in a manner perfectly well understood by myself, and thoroughly accountable for and equally understandable (if not duplicable) by any person to whom I may elect to divulge my secrets. But I hope to carry these secrets to the grave as they are of no material benefit to mankind, and if they should be used by dishonest persons they might become a serious menace."

A peculiarly pathetic instance of belief that Houdini could reach into the hidden world for psychic aid was afforded by Sarah Bernhardt.

Early in 1917, during her last tour of the United States, after she had lost her leg, Madame Bernhardt was playing in Boston at a time when Houdini was also filling

an engagement there, at Keith's Theater. She invited him to visit her at her hotel, and there for half an hour Houdini performed for her some of his choicest mysteries. The next day he was doing one of his outdoor stunts, and he invited the Divine Sarah to watch the performance from a car as his guest. She saw him thrust into a strait-jacket, chained and locked up, and suspended head downward from the top of a tall building, and from this precarious position she saw him free himself.

As they were driving back in the car she suddenly embraced him, and in the caressing tones which only Bernhardt possessed, she said: "Houdini, you are a wonderful human being. You must possess some extraordinary power to perform such marvels. Won't you use it to restore my limb for me?"

Houdini looked at her, at once thrilled and amazed.

"You can bring it back, can't you?" pleaded the golden voice. "You ought to be able to bring it back, since you do these feats that mystify mankind."

There were tears in Houdini's eyes as he gazed at her appealing face and told her that he could do nothing except by natural means. During the entire ride back, lost in deep thought, she kept her eyes on his face. . . .

There is a more or less prevalent belief that certain East Indian magicians are endowed with supernatural powers which enable them to perform feats which no occidental can emulate. As a matter of fact the art of the magician as practiced in India is a century or more behind the art as developed in the western nations. No

East Indian conjurer has approached in skill and resourcefulness the late Alexander Herrmann or our own Harry Keller of happy memory. None can be compared with Houdini.

At best the East Indian fakirs have a few clever stock tricks, which they have perfected through successive generations of performers, and in which the illusion is assisted for the occidental spectator by the exotic setting and the elaborate oriental hocus-pocus. At worst their offerings are wholly amateurish stunts, which the first-rate western magician abandoned years ago. Master magicians have come out of the Orient—no one who ever saw the great Ching Ling Foo would have the temerity to deny that—but they have been few and far between, and India has offered no creative geniuses in that line during recent times.

This was Houdini's view, not infrequently expressed, and it was the result of the most exhaustive study of magicians and their methods ever made by any one.

The principal stock trick of the fakir is the basket trick. In this a boy is tied in a net and pushed into a pot-bellied basket, on which a lid is placed, and the whole concealed under a sheet. After many incantations the magician removes the lid, stamps in the basket, and finally, jumping out, jabs into it rapidly with a sword. After some further hocus-pocus, the boy is made to reappear from the basket.

As Houdini explained it, the boy is a contortionist. As soon as he enters the basket, he coils himself against the

bulging sides. When the fakir is poking into the basket with his sword, the boy is wriggling about in the bottom, keeping out of reach, often guiding the thrusts between his legs, as every movement in the act has been painstakingly rehearsed over and again.

The pièce de luxe of the East Indian repertoire, however, is the rope trick. This is indeed difficult to explain by natural means.

According to the description, the fakir tosses a rope into the air. Magically the rope remains suspended upward, so to speak, into space. One of his assistants climbs the rope and vanishes in the air. In a short time his dismembered body comes crashing to the ground. The fakir gathers the pieces together and places them under a cloth. Presently the climber jumps up from the cloth—smiling, whole and unharmed.

There is only one trouble with this marvel—it was never performed. It is one of those things that a friend of a friend of mine had described to him by a man who had heard that it was done in a neighboring province. It is said to have been described originally in a book of travels written by a Mogul emperor over three hundred years ago, but no one knows whether the emperor was a veracious person or even whether he asserted that he saw the thing himself.

Not long ago an Englishman spent two years in India hunting for a glimpse of this marvel. He was unable to discover it, or even to find any person who had seen it.

In the early days in the United States the lot of the

native magician was not easy. Magic, perhaps, was not in the American tradition. The regular theaters would have nothing to do with the magic-mongers. So they were compelled to hire halls in the large cities and put on their own shows. The best of these pioneers of American wizardry were Professor W. H. Young, Harrington, Wyman, and Napoleon. They were famous in their day, and made a comfortable living, but they were long since completely forgotten.

European magicians were the first to open first-rate American theaters to performers in their art. The profession had reached a high point by the time of Alexander Herrmann, who died in 1896. . . .

Had Houdini put his abilities to evil uses he would undoubtedly have been the gravest individual menace ever known to organized society. He could enter or leave any building or chamber at will, leaving no trace of breakage behind him, and he could open the strongest steel vault as easily as a skilled second-story man could pry loose a bedroom window. No cell or jail could hold him, for he could solve any lock system in a few minutes and pass through the most elaborate door. Had he chosen the crooked path, society would have been compelled to have him put to death for its own protection, for nothing short of the capital penalty would have served.

Doubtless Houdini would have wrought even greater havoc in human society had he perverted his genius for illusion to make himself the central figure of a new religious cult. He could have done this without difficulty.

Moreover, he was aware of what he could accomplish in setting himself up as the inspired prophet of a new mystical religion, and the full implications, in wealth and power and position, of such an adventure. Those of his friends who were privileged to witness the occasional "séances," usually of a wholly impromptu character, which he sometimes gave for their edification during his later years, can understand his possibilities in this field. The effects he would produce in the course of an evening at a friend's home where he happened to be making a social visit would make the ordinary mediumistic phenomena seem quite childish. Spectators would be awed in spite of repeated assurances from Houdini that he was merely tricking them. On Hallowe'en, 1922, while he was a guest at the home of Sophie Irene Loeb at Harmon-on-Hudson, Houdini gave a mock séance including a spirit message from Jack London, and the effects he produced were so weird that after he returned home he was impelled to write in his diary, "I must put on record that it was done wholly by dexterity."

Had Houdini posed as one supernaturally inspired, one who could escape even into another world and return with messages and mandates and commands, and had he chosen to substantiate his claim by achieving seeming miracles for which a normal physical explanation could hardly be found, he could easily have established a formidable army of worshipers among millions of simple and credulous persons eager to be lifted out of a humdrum existence by messages from the skies. The pseudo-prophet

would have been a more terrible portent than the super-cracksman, because of his power to sway the minds and souls of men.

Fortunately neither crime nor black magic had any lure for Houdini. He was a healthy-minded human being, apparently with no abnormal rift in his psychological structure. It was natural for him to play straight, and so he lived and died as a great showman.

Yet that description falls short of doing Houdini justice. Quite aside from his professional genius, he was a rabbinical puritan, with much sentimentalism in his make-up, and a streak of mysticism. While he devoted his life largely to devising methods for the breaking of physical bonds, he was also interested in breaking psychic bonds and communicating with friends who had passed through a door for which he had no picklock. After the death of his mother this curiosity developed into a passion. His experiences with mediums led him to a warfare on frauds who strove to palm off phenomena of trickery and sleight of hand as manifestations from the dead. During the last few years of his life all his energy and skill and showmanship were enlisted in this crusade.

II

THE baby who was to be Houdini was born in the town of Appleton, Wisconsin, April 6, 1874, the son of Dr. Mayer Samuel Weiss and his wife Cecilia. He was named Ehrich. He was the fifth child, and others were to follow.

When Ehrich was born, Dr. Weiss and his wife were newly settled in Appleton. They had fled from Hungary rather precipitately. Their story is romantic.

Dr. Weiss and his wife both came of cultured and prosperous Jewish families in Budapest. In his youth Mayer Weiss won distinction as a scholar. He became a rabbi and a teacher, and a brilliant career in scholarship was predicted for him. While still a very young man he married Rosa Schillak, a singer at the Hofoper at Budapest, whose sister, by a curious coincidence, later married the original Herrmann the Great. Rosa Schillak did not live very long, and the young widower sadly settled down to his studies and teachings.

Some years later he received from a close friend, a man considerably younger, a strange request. This young man confided to Weiss that he was in love with a beautiful girl, who, he suspected, reciprocated his affection, but he had not the courage to put the question. He asked Mayer Samuel Weiss, as an older man, learned and eloquent, to go to the young lady, Miss Cecilia Steiner, and

plead his suit for him. Weiss was well acquainted with both the young lady and her family.

After some hesitation Weiss consented and set forth on his John Alden mission. He put forth an eloquent plea, prefacing it with excuses for his friend's shyness, but even as he talked he saw that the young lady's feeling was not for his principal. In fact she mildly suggested that her heart could be enlisted only for a man who could speak for himself, and she intimated that the eloquent Weiss might do that most satisfactorily.

Weiss went home with his head in a whirl. He was more than twenty-five years older than Cecilia, and his reason told him that an alliance between them, with such a disparity of ages, was highly unwise and somewhat ridiculous, as well as unfair to his young friend. However, the case of Cecilia could not be settled by reason. After hours of pacing about his study, he sat down at his desk, wrote an impassioned history of his life, and asked, in conclusion, that Cecilia accept him as a husband.

Cecilia replied primly, in accordance with the proprieties of the times: "Herr Weiss: I was highly surprised at your letter, though your honoring intentions were already known to me." She politely referred him to her family. In that quarter there was no objection, save from a certain Uncle Heller, an aristocratic person who held that Weiss's position was not quite lofty enough for Cecilia. He was overruled. They were married May 27, 1864.

Apparently Dr. Weiss and his bride were destined to

settle down to a distinguished and comfortable life in Budapest. Four children were born. Then came sudden tragedy and exile. The actual events are a bit obscure. Dr. Weiss, as he grew old in America, would never talk of them, and Houdini was equally reticent. It seems clear, however, that a duel was fought between Dr. Weiss and a man of distinguished name, a gentile, trained to the use of arms. It is also clear that the slender Jewish scholar left the field unwounded, while his opponent was carried off to die. It is also apparent that in the encounter Dr. Weiss was defending the good name of his race against bitter slander.

The outcome, it appears, was that the Weiss family left the country alone and without resources.

Some relatives in Milwaukee helped Mrs. Weiss and the children to get to the United States and to Appleton. Some months later, through the interposition of influential relatives in Europe, Dr. Weiss was able to join them, and about the time of his arrival little Ehrich was born. Between the time of his conception and his birth the fortunes of the family had completely changed. From a condition of security and comfort, in a gracious society, swift events had hurled them into a penniless exile in a land whose very language was wholly strange to them. They had, in a material sense, nothing on hand, nothing to look forward to. In fact they had only their love and pride. With these they faced the situation.

Ehrich was a strong, sound, happy baby. His mother

always insisted, in later years, that he never cried. Only one characteristic gave her a little uneasiness—he slept barely half as much as had her other babies. At times when the average well-ordered infant would be deep in slumber, young Ehrich would lie in his crib, awake and content, for long periods, his bright steel-blue eyes roving curiously from one object to another.

The self-sufficient baby developed into a fearless small boy possessed of as much overflowing energy and endless curiosity about the world as an eager, darting terrier.

Almost the earliest family anecdote about him is concerned with his engaging habit of learning from his elders When he was about seven his teacher met him on the street one day. She greeted him with a smiling grown-up "Good morning" that made Ehrich flush and mumble in childish embarrassment.

"When a gentleman meets a lady, Ehrich," the teacher instructed him, "he should take off his hat and bow."

Without another word Ehrich darted past her down the street. He ran clear around the block to meet her at the next corner, to her amused astonishment. This time he swept off his cap and bowed with quite an air.

His roving curiosity and lack of fear gave his parents frequent concern, and it was not easy for Dr. Weiss to maintain a philosophic calm when, one evening, in the twilight, he beheld his son stumbling across a very high trestle, bearing on his back an awkward and top-heavy collection of old metal he had salvaged.

It was inevitable that locks should have received his early attention. Lockpicking had advantages besides satisfying his desire to know how things were done. His mother, for reasons obvious to any mother of a large brood, kept a substantial lock on the cupboard that held her *Apfelkuchen* and *Torten*. Though the lock showed no sign of having been tampered with, sweets began to disappear with annoying regularity. Circumstantial evidence developed to attach the thefts to Ehrich. Mrs. Weiss reënforced the defenses of the cupboard with a padlock, but within a few days the mystery of this device was also solved, and bits of pastry continued to vanish.

To the end of his days, by the way, this devotion to pies persisted. On his last Sunday at home in New York, before his final tour from which he never returned, Mrs. Houdini made for dinner two strawberry pies, of which he was particularly fond. She, too, kept a lock on her pie closet—not to keep out Houdini, for no lock was too complicated for him—but for other domestic reasons. They went for a walk in Central Park in the morning, and as they promenaded, her wifely instinct detected in Houdini's pleased yet placating manner some unconfessed mischief. Just before dinner she discovered the peccadillo. One of the pies was gone. On the empty plate lay Houdini's visiting card.

The boy Ehrich was always prying into junk piles to find cast-off fasteners to study and treasure. This fascination never left him. His friends relate that he was never in any strange room long before he was examining

all the locks—those on doors, on chests, on trunks. In a few minutes he would be on intimate terms with every one of them.

But the great delight of the small boy was in magic. A traveling circus came to town in one of his early summers, and along with several other youngsters he managed to slip under the canvas. Wandering about among the sideshows, he came upon a conjurer producing bunnies, flags, long streamers of ribbon, flowers, omelets, from an inexhaustible silk hat, and making cards and coins appear and disappear in the air. Immediately, the fat woman, the living skeleton, the elephant, and even the acrobats were forgotten, and Ehrich parked himself in front of that man of simple guile and stared absorbedly at his manipulations of wonder. When he did not return for supper his family began making inquiries, and Rabbi Weiss finally found him between the conjurer's knees, being initiated into the mysteries of making a dried pea appear under any one of three cups.

Thereafter, when a circus came to town, Ehrich made straightway for the dusty platform where the "Peerless MYSTERIARCH of Three Continents" or "The Wonder-Working Wizard of the World" performed his homely mysteries to the accompaniment of crude patter. Not circus guards, nor watchful town constables, nor parental threats could keep him from these vigils, from which he returned to practice card palming, coin materialization, and the simpler sleights he had observed.

The Weiss family had so many boys that they were

a gang in themselves, but Theodore—"Dash"—was his brother Ehrich's most devoted follower. Together they practiced the balancings and stretchings and jumps of the clowns and acrobats. Ehrich could far surpass Dash's utmost endeavor, for he had a limberness and quickness and loose-jointedness that gave him an unfair advantage in contests. Such rigorous feats he put upon his youthful muscles! And how his companions did try to outdare him and finish his young boasting! In the matter of rope-escapes he could beat them all, too. Boy fashion, the gang cherished scraps of rope, and in his visits to the circus lots the future "Escape Wizard of the World" picked up a variety of ingenious rope-ties from the good-natured canvas-men.

Meanwhile the Weiss family grew steadily larger, and the Weiss income smaller. Dr. Weiss's little classes in Hebrew and his rabbinical services, taken together, brought in but a pittance. He was aging and sadly hampered by his inability to speak the language of the country, though he spoke both French and German fluently. The Jewish residents of Appleton and the environs were few, and the younger generation among them were growing impatient at what they regarded as their rabbi's old-fashioned ideas. They were caught in the strong onward sweep of American life, and to most of them the patient, fine-grained old-world scholar seemed out of the picture.

At the age of six or seven Ehrich began to hunt odd jobs. He was fond in later years of telling how, as a newsboy, he had sold copies of the first issue of the

Milwaukee Journal, and, as a bootblack, he had on one proud occasion polished the shoes of the governor of the State.

When Ehrich was nine, Jack Hoeffler's Five-Cent Circus came to town, and the lad applied for a job as performer. Probably the manager remembered from previous visits the youngster who had parked himself in front of the conjurer's stand. At any rate, he let Ehrich show him his tricks. They suspended Ehrich head downward from a rope and saw him pick up pins with his eyelids. He let them tie him up with ropes from which he speedily managed to free himself. Possibly the manager felt rather benevolent, possibly he saw possibilities in exploiting a local "boy wonder." At any rate, Ehrich was engaged, and thus at the age of nine started his professional career.

Of course he wanted to go off with the circus when it left town, and of course his parents refused. They had been pretty liberal, as parents go, to permit him to appear at all, for a Five-Cent Circus hardly offered an ideal environment for a boy of nine.

Dr. Weiss was making a trip to Milwaukee shortly after this, and to assuage Ehrich's disappointment he promised to take him along and show him a real magician, the famous Dr. Lynn, an Englishman, who was then touring the States. Dr. Lynn's specialty was an illusion which he grandiloquently named "Paligenesia." In this he pretended to administer chloroform to a man and then to dismember him, finally restoring his limbs and leading him before the footlights alive and smiling. To Ehrich Weiss

the illusion was a real miracle. Thirty years later Houdini purchased this trick from Dr. Lynn's son in England for seventy-five dollars, and during his last two years, when he was running his own show, he presented it with Dr. Lynn's original apparatus—except the chloroform—as a mirth-provoking deception.

Ehrich hung about the shop of the local locksmith in Appleton so much that finally the man gave him a job. He was then eleven years old. In a few weeks he was able to pick every lock in the place, and he fashioned out of a bit of wire a little picklock which could master any fastening apparatus with which he came in contact.

The town sheriff entered the shop one day with a gigantic prisoner in tow. The man had been arrested on some complaint but had been discharged by the justice for lack of evidence. When they went to unlock the handcuffs, the key could not be found; so the sheriff had brought the discharged prisoner to the locksmith to have the iron bracelets filed off.

The locksmith filed away for a time at the tough steel. It was a hot day. No breath of air stirred the leaves of the trees outside. Sweat streamed down the old fellow's face. The sheriff yawned. "Jim, let the kid work on them things for a spell, and you come out with me and git a glass of beer." There was nothing criminal in getting a glass of beer in those days. The locksmith went.

Ehrich had been staring at the stranger with the fascinated attention always bestowed by small boys on lawbreakers and other heroes. Now that he was left alone with

him, he felt less comfortable. He always remembered him as the ugliest person he had ever seen, a giant with a shock of coarse black hair over a bony face covered with a growth of bristly beard save where a scar gleamed through, blue-white like a frog's belly. The man scowled at Ehrich silently.

The minutes rolled on while Ehrich worked and sweated, but the file made little impression in his inexperienced hands. The man grew more and more restless.

Ehrich had a sudden idea.

"Wait a minute," he said, and fished out of his pocket a tangle of string and bits of metal and other miscellany and finally his picklock. He had never tackled a handcuff lock before, and as he adjusted his wire to the cuff he wondered uneasily what that uncouth giant would do to him if the bit of bent wire did not work. The man was watching every move of Ehrich's fingers with unwavering intentness.

A minute later one cuff fell off, and the second quickly yielded. Then Ehrich stepped back hastily and shoved the picklock back into his pocket, while the man rubbed his wrists and stared at the boy thoughtfully. What idea was gathering under his thatched skull Ehrich never knew, for at that moment the sheriff returned and the man was told to clear out and keep out of trouble. Ehrich never saw him again and never wanted to.

He was probably the only man who was ever able to watch Houdini open a handcuff.

After a time the locksmith went out of business, and

Ehrich was again reduced to selling papers, bootblacking, and other petty tasks which no longer interested him. Even at the age of eleven Appleton seemed to him a small place lacking in opportunity and excitement, especially when magicians like Dr. Lynn were touring the great cities of the world, winning fortune and renown.

He wanted to go off into the world himself, but he knew this project would be vetoed if he put it before his father and mother. He pondered the matter many weeks. Would he be missed very much? The household was as poor as one could well imagine, and painfully overcrowded—he had been the fifth child and there were now two younger brothers and a sister. He didn't see that he could help them very much by staying in Appleton.

A serious conversation with his father, on Ehrich's twelfth birthday, reënforced the boy's resolution to set forth to seek his fortune. Dr. Weiss had been greatly impressed by the mature sense of responsibility shown by this son and by his deep-rooted tenderness for his mother. "Ehrich, I am getting to be an old man," he said. "Promise that if anything happens to me, you will see that your mother never comes to want."

Ehrich solemnly promised. A few weeks later he took the first step toward fitting himself to carry out his vow. He vanished from Appleton without leaving any message, for he took no chances on being followed and brought back. Several days—days of frantic uneasiness in the Weiss household—elapsed before his mother received a postcard from the wanderer. "Dear Ma," he wrote, "I

am going to Galveston, Texas, and will be home in about a year. My best regards to all. Your truant son, Ehrich Weiss."

In his later years Houdini could throw no light on why he had fixed on Galveston as a destination. Probably it was merely a false trail to mislead family pursuers.

Ehrich set out on a sunny morning with no possessions save the clothes on his back. Partly on foot, partly beating his way on a freight train, he came in the afternoon to the little town of Delevan, Wisconsin.

A housewife, Mrs. Flitcroft, responding to a knock on her door, found a ragged, dusty small boy who inquired if he could do some job about the place to earn a meal. Mrs. Flitcroft took him in, fed him, and allowed him to sleep before the fire. While he was sleeping she noticed two big rents in the trousers of this diminutive wanderer. Without disturbing him she took them off, patched them, and cleaned them. In the morning she sent Ehrich on his way, his pockets plentifully filled with food.

When, some years later, Houdini got his first real engagement as a performer, out of his first week's salary he bought a silk blouse for Mrs. Flitcroft and sent it to her with a five-dollar bill pinned to it. This gift in the abrupt Houdini manner was the beginning of a series of remembrances.

After leaving Mrs. Flitcroft, Ehrich wandered on from place to place, sometimes tramping the roads, sometimes taking informal rides on freights. He worked at odd jobs, doing his tricks wherever opportunity offered

and taking up a collection from the yokels. He found no ready pot of gold, but he did not starve. His course lay southward at first, then pretty steadily east. If Galveston was really his original destination that was soon forgotten.

Sometimes he would come upon a provincial circus or a fair. The resolute little wanderer would seek out some man in authority.

"I am Eric the Great," he would say. "I can let any one tie me with ropes, and I can get free."

If the man was persuaded to give him a test, he could usually get a brief engagement to exhibit his skill. That was what he liked to do, but any job—delivering packages, watching a baby carriage for a shopping mother, or helping men at work in the fields—was good for the price of a meal. He had abounding courage and resourcefulness—plus good health.

Once when he was performing at a country circus a local constable tied him up. After Ehrich had wriggled free, the man pulled from his pockets a pair of handcuffs.

"Here, bub," he said good-naturedly. "D'you think you kin git loose from these?"

Eric the Great hesitated. He jammed his hands into his pockets. In one he could feel the bit of wire with which he had freed the handcuffed prisoner in Appleton.

"I'll try," he said. "You must let me go off by myself to try."

The constable snapped on the cuffs while the crowd grinned. Eric the Great vanished behind a convenient

curtain, and in a few minutes he reappeared carrying the cuffs opened.

The amazement of the officer and of the rest of the country crowd made a great impression on the boy. Eric the Great mused on the possibility of putting on a handcuff-escape act.

About this time he was able to send a little money home and to get a letter from his mother. His father, he learned, had finally given up the struggle in Appleton and had gone to New York to try his luck there. The rest of the family were remaining in Appleton until Dr. Weiss could afford to make a home for them in New York. Ehrich presently made his way to the city and joined his father. The two had not seen each other for nearly a year.

New York, Dr. Weiss had decided, offered the best field in the country for a Hebrew scholar to find a livelihood, and he had come to the city literally to begin life anew. At the age of sixty-four he set himself to learn English in order to further his fortunes, and he succeeded in mastering the language.

Already pupils were gathering about him, and for a time Ehrich helped him in his little school, for he had learned a smattering of Hebrew at his father's knee. Between whiles, Ehrich worked as a messenger boy.

While Ehrich was still a messenger he and Dr. Weiss managed to save enough money to send for the family. In a little flat in the upper East Side there was a joyous

reunion. They were deplorably crowded, but happy to be together at last and in a real city again, for both Dr. Weiss and his wife were urban folk, and they had had difficulty in adjusting themselves to life in a small town.

After the family arrived Ehrich got his first regular job, as a necktie cutter, and in this he continued more than two years. He was a good worker. Under date of April 3, 1891, H. Richter's Sons, 502 Broadway, gave him the following recommendation, the original of which was found among his papers after his death: "To whom it may concern: We hereby certify that Mr. Ehrich Weiss has been in our employ for two years and six months as assistant lining cutter and we cheerfully recommend him as an honest and industrious young man."

Ehrich managed to join the Pastime Athletic Club and became an amateur runner, winning medals in various junior classes. He had his picture taken in running costume, a gangly youth, his chest plentifully bespangled with medals. On the back of the photograph he wrote: "The medals are most all real, too. Ma made the pants for me out of red Karsha satin."

But Ehrich purposed to be neither a runner nor a necktie cutter. During every spare moment he practiced magic and card tricks and studied the mysteries of locks and rope ties. He was continually astonishing the members of his family and the neighbors with his increasing skill, and after a time such organizations as the Friendly Circle ("entertainment and ball at Schillerbund Hall") and the Literary Society of the Y.M.H.A. ("special

ladies' night") began to include Ehrich Weiss, conjurer, on their programs of home talent. Sometimes, when he confined himself to card tricks, he was billed as "Cardo," sometimes he appeared as "Eric the Great."

In his sixteenth year came a notable event. Already the boy had begun to haunt second-hand bookshops, pouncing on books on magic, and, unless the price were beyond his eager reach, lugging them home as treasure trove and poring over them until long after the rest of the family was asleep. In one of his prowling excursions he came across a battered volume entitled *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ambassador, Author and Conjurer, Written by Himself*. At the cost of a few cents Ehrich had the volume under his arm when he went home that evening.

After dinner he retired to his room with the book and plunged into its new world of wonder. He read of complicated secret mechanisms to control automata which could write messages, draw pictures, or fetch from a miniature shop any kind of pastry or wine, seemingly in response to the conjurer's wand; of ingenious blow-pipe arrangements whereby orange trees were made to flower and give fruit in response to the same commanding motion; of complicated rods and hidden shelves to support beautiful ladies apparently floating through the air in a trance. Poring over the pages, the excited neophyte found the key to miracles of sleight and illusion that had puzzled him for years, and to many other magical secrets hitherto unknown to him.

This book, written in a free and romantic style, the

apparent autobiography of a great magician, has captured the imagination of many others interested in magic, but to no other person probably had Robert-Houdin seemed such an authentic major prophet as he did to Ehrich Weiss.

When Ehrich's mother got up next morning she discovered him still seated beside his bed, fully clothed, bending over the volume. The bed was undisturbed. Through the night he had read and re-read, with steadily growing enthusiasm. At last he had found the key to the world of wonder which he had been half-consciously seeking since he was a slip of a lad.

"At once," he wrote years later, "Robert-Houdin became my guide and hero. I accepted his writings as my textbook and my gospel. What Blackstone is to the struggling lawyer, Hardee's *Tactics* to the would-be officer, or Bismarck's life and writings to the coming statesman, Robert-Houdin's books were to me. To my unsophisticated mind, his *Memoirs* gave to the profession a dignity worth attaining at the cost of earnest, lifelong effort."

Ehrich lost no time in relating to his friend Jack Hayman, who had performed with him at some amateur gatherings, the news of his wonderful discovery. Both boys were thinking seriously of venturing into magic as a career, and for Ehrich the book clinched the argument. Jack said that the addition of the letter "i" to the name Houdin would give the meaning, in French, of "like Robert-Houdin." This suggestion struck fire in Ehrich. "I asked nothing more in life than to become, in my pro-

fession, like Robert-Houdin," he wrote, years later, in recalling the incident. Immediately he adopted that proud name.

Ehrich Weiss disappeared forever, and in his place was Houdini.

III

A FEW months after the discovery of the memoirs of Robert-Houdin, Ehrich abandoned his job as a necktie cutter and he and his chum Jack Hayman struck out as professional entertainers under the name of the Houdini Brothers. They performed various feats of magic, including as their most ambitious feature the so-called trunk trick, wherein one of the performers is securely roped and locked in a trunk, the trunk is concealed for a minute by a curtain, and when it is reopened the original occupant has vanished and in his place his partner is discovered bound in the same fashion. Houdini delighted audiences with this trick to the close of his career. It was not original with him, but he brought it to a development which would have amazed the older magicians.

Houdini's decision to put to the test his ability as a professional magician was strengthened by the death of his father in 1892. When he felt himself failing, Dr. Weiss summoned Ehrich and bade him repeat his pledge, made on the boy's twelfth birthday in Appleton, that he would always care for his mother. Through his life Houdini observed this pledge in generous measure. Even in his poorest days he always managed to send most of his salary to his mother, and after he won fame nothing was too good for her.

The partnership with Jack Hayman was short-lived.

The boys could not agree, so after a few months Houdini substituted his brother Theodore as the other "brother." The boys played clubs and schools and entertained at minor social gatherings for a small fee, picking up a precarious livelihood which they usually had to reënforce by doing odd jobs of a wholly unmagical character.

In 1893 the brothers gravitated to Chicago and filled an engagement at a sideshow at the World's Fair, and thereafter Ehrich, as Harry Houdini, "Handcuff King and Escape Artist," appeared for a time alone at Kohl and Middleton's famous Dime Museum at Chicago, doing twenty shows a day for twelve dollars a week. At the museum Houdini performed his handcuff act, which was his own novelty, and he supplemented this by escaping from a packing box. The latter was not a new trick. Harry Keller had introduced it before American audiences in the seventies. A prepared box with one trick board was used, and with this apparatus—which, by the way, can still be bought for a dollar or two from vendors of magic—it was easy for any performer of fair agility to mystify simple audiences. In later days Houdini discarded the trick box altogether and permitted challengers to build their own chests and nail him up on the stage.

In the Hall of Freaks and Miracle Workers at Kohl and Middleton's were a rare assortment of curious persons: Strong Men, Fat Ladies, Sword Swallowers, Fire-Eaters, Siamese Twins, Jugglers, Bearded Ladies, Laloo the Bird Girl and many others. Houdini, aged eighteen, studied them all closely for showmanship and technique,

but his particular attention was reserved for Horace Goldin, an established magician who appeared on the same bill at the fabulous weekly salary of seventy-five dollars. Goldin really was—and still is—a competent purveyor of magic, proud of his skill and thoroughly self-satisfied. When the upstart Houdini sought to exchange ideas with him, Goldin snubbed him pompously. "Why should I talk to you?" he sneered. "You get twelve dollars a week, I get seventy-five, heh! You got nothing to tell me."

Twenty years later Houdini was being paid fifteen hundred dollars a week and Goldin was receiving substantially less. Occasionally the two met, in the course of their careers, and Houdini's references in his diary to the older man were invariably bitter, for the snub never ceased to rankle.

Back in New York, in the spring of 1894, Houdini played for a time at a beach resort.

"Harry," remarked the manager one day, "why do you say, 'You can see, ladies and gentlemen, that I ain't got nothing up my sleeve'?"

"What's wrong with it?" asked Houdini.

"Say 'I have nothing up my sleeve.' It sounds better."

"Thanks," said Houdini, shortly. He never used "I ain't got" again.

About this time Houdini fell in love, in his abrupt and impetuous manner, and married the girl who was to be his only intimate companion to the end of his days. He

was then nineteen. This romantic adventure can best be told in Beatrice Houdini's own words:

"At the beginning of the summer of 1894 Houdini, unaccompanied by his brother, gave an exhibition at a small high school. I was a pupil at the school, barely eighteen, and naturally was eager to view the entertainment. It was difficult to persuade my mother to let me go, because in our family all 'shows' were regarded as wicked and unfit for the eyes of young women. On one occasion even a Punch and Judy show had been frowned on as dangerous. However, I coaxed persuasively for the school exhibition, and mother finally gave a doubtful and suspicious assent, and we went together and sat in the very front row.

"While Houdini did his tricks I sat with my eyes popping from my head, my hand ecstatically squeezing mother's. I had never dreamed of such wonders, and to me the performer was a marvelous genius.

"Then came an unhappy accident. In the course of a trick an awkward movement by the young magician upset some acid on a table which spilled over my dress, staining it beyond redemption. My mother, who had come against her will and had observed with growing distrust Houdini's defiance of natural laws, lost her temper completely at this mishap and scolded the performer unmercifully, even threatening to have him arrested.

"Houdini, meanwhile, had leaped down to us, all apologies and humiliation. I managed to whisper to him: 'Don't mind Mother. I think you're wonderful.'

"'Do you?' he exclaimed, straightening up, and for a long moment our eyes held while mother and the rest of the audience were completely forgotten.

"I was taken home almost immediately, but that long look we had interchanged was both an ending and a beginning for both of us, and before I left, Houdini managed to whisper that he would see me again.

"The second day following he rang the bell of our house, a little frame house with a tiny front yard. My mother opened the door a few inches. 'What do you want? Up to more tricks?' she said.

"'I'm having another dress made for the young lady,' said Houdini. 'I want the ruined one, to get the proper size.'

"After some further parley, Mother got the old dress and placed it in his hands. 'Be off with you,' she said. But meanwhile I had been peering out of my window at this handsome, alert-looking young man with his frank blue-gray eyes and curly dark hair. As he turned away, I waved my hand at him, and presently I stole out and we took a brief walk together—my first walk alone with a beau.

"It was a week before he reappeared with a very pretty pink dress. His mother had sat up nights making it with her own hands, for, of course, they were too poor to buy one. Mother, still unrelenting, took the package from him and closed the door, shutting him out without a word. Houdini stood in the yard, a very uncomfortable-looking young man. Then I opened the window and called to him:

"'You'd better wait until we see how it fits.'

"In a few minutes I slipped down the stairs with the new dress on, seizing my hat and my purse as I left the room.

" 'The dress is wonderful,' I said, turning around to show him how the frills stood out.

" 'You are wonderful,' said Houdini, and his voice shook, for he was only nineteen. No young man had ever spoken to me in such a voice before.

"Without another word we began to walk down the street together. Luckily my mother was occupied with some housework and did not see her abandoned daughter walking out unchaperoned with a young man.

"A few blocks off we saw a crowd of Italians. They surrounded a carriage in which sat a girl in a white veil and a man who was kissing her. The people were throwing flowers at them and they seemed to be so happy.

" 'You would make a beautiful bride,' remarked Houdini thoughtfully.

"He suggested a visit to Coney Island. I was dismayed at such an adventurous excursion, but finally agreed. It was then early in the afternoon. The wonders of the famous boardwalk were a new world to me and time slipped by unnoticed. Suddenly I realized that it was late in the afternoon and we were far from my home. I began to cry.

"Houdini, all tender solicitude, vainly tried to comfort me. Between sobs I explained to him that I had never before been away from home alone for more than a brief errand. My long absence would not be forgiven. I would

be scolded severely, locked in my room. I would have to say eighteen rosaries as a punishment—on my knees on the hard floor, before the little altar father had fixed up in our home.

" 'If you were my wife, they wouldn't dare punish you,' cried Houdini fiercely. His suggestion astounded me—he seemed such a shy young man.

"Near by stood a second-hand jewelry store, its window containing an alluring display of wedding rings. Before I knew it, Houdini had whisked me inside, and I was trying some of the rings on my finger. One that fitted was speedily found, but when it came to paying, Houdini turned out his pockets with a look of dismay. He had spent all the money he had in his pocket on the shows we had seen, and there was only a little change left. At this point I thought of my purse. For a wonder, I happened to have a little money in it, so we bought the ring together.

"How people went about getting married was a mystery to both of us. While we were considering ways and means, I suddenly thought of a man in Coney Island with whom my father had once had some business, who, my father had said, 'could do anything.' The phrase had stuck in my mind.

" 'There's a man here named John Y. McKane,' I said. 'I'm sure he can marry us.'

"We hunted up McKane, who was then the satrap of that part of the world. By good luck we found him in his office, and by good luck he received us. He even remembered, or pretended to remember, my name, Rahner. But

when we stated our errand, he flatly refused our request.

"'Why, you're nothing but a couple of foolish kids,' he said. 'You go home to your mother, young woman, or I'll be tempted to have you both arrested.'

"We told Mr. McKane that if he didn't marry us, we were determined to elope anyway, and finally he relented, laughed, and said: 'Oh, well, youngsters, I suppose I might as well put you out of your misery. Have you got a license?'

"We hadn't thought about a license. But McKane was something of a magician in his own domain, and in a short time he had one ready for us. I still had two dollars in my purse and I slipped them stealthily to Houdini, who paid them out for the license with dignity. So we were properly married by the Boss of Coney Island, with two ward heelers as witnesses. The date was June 22, 1894.

"Probably few persons have married in such haste. Doubtless it was a risky and immature procedure, but our instincts served us well. When Houdini died we had been married for thirty-three years, and we were romantically in love to the end.

"'Now,' said Houdini, as we left McKane's office, 'I shall take my bride home to my mother.'

"It was a long ride by trolley from Coney Island to the Weiss home on East Sixty-seventh Street, Manhattan, but Ehrich's arm was about me and I was too much in a daze to think about difficulties or to care about time. Probably I should have reflected a little on the shocked reactions of my family to this hasty marriage. My people were

very poor. In our austere German standards of respectability public entertainers were beyond the pale—and I had married a showman. Besides, though the matter had not been mentioned, I gathered from Ehrich's appearance that he was a Jew, and in our simple Catholic upbringing a Jew was a person of doubtful human attributes. It was long before the growth of tolerance, before Mr. Dooley and Abe Potash and the Feitelbaums and Abie's Irish Rose. If I had given thought to these things it might similarly have occurred to me that Ehrich's mother, as an orthodox Jewish woman, would have similar doubt and resentment against me, because I was a Roman Catholic—but Ehrich was kissing me, and nothing else mattered beyond the spring in our hearts.

"I had no fear until we were standing in the hallway of a tenement and Ehrich was knocking at a door, and I found myself confronted by a handsome elderly woman with finely chiseled features and the bearing of a queen.

" 'Mother dear,' said Ehrich, 'here is my wife. I love her very much.'

"He spoke in German, my own family tongue, though at the time he did not know that I could understand.

"For a moment I felt his mother's bright black eyes probing very deep within me.

" 'You love each other very much?' she asked, also in German.

" 'Yes, Mother.'

" 'Then I haven't lost a son. I have gained a daughter.'

"With that she took me to her arms.

"I was perhaps fortunate in that the Weisses had several sons and only one daughter. My own parents, by a curious coincidence, had nine daughters and one son.

"Thereafter, as far as our itinerant life permitted, her home was mine, and after she gave up housekeeping, my home, for the rest of her life, was hers. Her instant acceptance of me was the more beautiful because Houdini's love for his mother had dominated his life completely. After my coming there were of course two loves in his life, running parallel, so to speak. But never was there any sense of clashing or of division. As I look back at this, I realize that the perfect smoothness of our relationship was largely due to the mother's fine sense of human values and rare generosity of spirit. She kept her son's devotion and she made me feel that her life was enriched by my affection for her and by his happiness with me.

"It was a poor and crowded home. In fact, for that first night, there was really no room for us. Houdini could sleep with one of his brothers. A shakedown was found for me with a neighbor across the hall, whose name, as I understood the introduction, was Mrs. Moore.

"I went to bed early, in a cot in a diminutive bedroom, but the excitement of the evening made me wakeful. Finally I dropped into a restless slumber from which I awakened suddenly with a sense of some one moving in the room. I opened my eyes cautiously, and to my horror saw a Chinaman in a long silk robe tiptoeing into the room carrying a lighted candle. I was, of course, an inexperienced child, but I had seen posters of numerous melo-

dramas in which innocent white girls (usually very buxom and blonde) were being carried off as white slaves by wicked Chinese. I had only the vaguest notion about white slavery, but I knew that every Chinaman was a fiend devoted to kidnaping and opium, so I realized in an instant my great peril. A moment later my screams woke the household and the whole neighborhood. The Chinaman vanished, doors slammed, windows crunched open, and I could hear footsteps running. Soon Houdini burst into the room.

"Mrs. Moore, it appeared, was really Mrs. Moy and her husband was a Chinese physician. At her request he had tiptoed into my room to get some articles of apparel she had left there.

"For a time, because the Weiss home was too crowded to shelter us, we took a little furnished room. I had to borrow one of Mother Weiss's skirts, because I looked so much like a little girl in my own clothes that lodging-house keepers turned us away suspiciously. A week was spent in lodgings in Coney Island, where the brothers had a brief engagement at a dance hall. Also, Houdini was compelled for diplomatic reasons to wangle two more marriage ceremonies, which were more difficult than that performed by John Y. McKane. The first of these was by a Jewish rabbi, for Houdini's family, the second by a Roman Catholic priest. But even after I was properly married in the faith, my people still rejected us. I corresponded secretly with my sister Stella, and she told me that the ice was still unbroken. It was not until twelve

years later that my mother consented to see me. I was seriously ill and wanted her badly, so Houdini, with one of his brothers, went to her home and would not leave until she came to me. Thereafter he was the same as a son to her.

"Within a few days after my marriage I began to realize that I had stepped into a world far different from my former well-ordered and sheltered life, a world of strange duties, strange contacts, and inexplicable happenings which my superstitious nature magnified into terrors. My own entire family believed in ghosts, witches, and the power of the evil eye and lived in a constant dread of supernatural evils. My sister Stella and I were probably the worst of the family. We believed that even minor acts of naughtiness were likely to bring a night-time visit from some witch or evil spirit, and that thunder and lightning were caused by our personal faults or wickednesses. We roomed together, and it was a rare night when we did not fall asleep quaking over something. When an unusual storm occurred we would vehemently accuse each other of having caused it.

"Stella, who was four years older than I, had fallen in love some time before my marriage, but shortly before the wedding day a witch had cast an evil eye upon her fiancé and he had died. These were the facts as Stella and I understood them, and Houdini's staunch skepticism when I told him amazed and frightened me. 'Nobody has the evil eye,' he said. 'Poor kid, I've got a job on my hands to teach you how silly it all is.'

"He had a job on his hands indeed. It was with infinite patience that he battled with my superstitions and helped to fit me into my new environment.

"My first shock came when I realized that it was assumed as a matter of course among the Houdinis that I was to take the place of Theodore—actually to go on the stage, as one of 'the Houdinis—Harry and Bessie.' The idea gave me a huge thrill, but I had been brought up to regard the stage as a sink of iniquity, and I was dreadfully ill at ease about it all. It was pleasant, however, to practice tricks with Harry and to be initiated into the secrecy of his mysteries.

"I was actually getting over my prejudice and beginning to look forward to my début as a public performer, when one night Harry brought home a pair of tights and made it clear that I would be expected to appear in these before large audiences of perfect strangers. Then my morale broke and I heartily wished myself home with my mother. For hours and hours I wept bitterly over those tights, but in the end Houdini's diplomacy and unfailing tenderness brought me round to a less desolate view of the inevitable.

"The last night the brothers worked together at the dance hall in Coney Island I had a bad scare. Houdini asked his brother and me to take a walk with him after the evening's work was over. He led us into the country on a dark, lonely bridge spanning some swiftly running black water. It was a weird-looking night, with a split moon that seemed to be dodging in and out behind heavy clouds.

In the middle of the bridge he halted us, and there we waited for a time silently, I at least in growing trepidation.

"Finally a distant bell tolled solemnly twelve times. As soon as the last beat ceased to reverberate, Houdini clasped his brother's hand and mine together, raised them aloft and cried: 'Beatrice, Dash, raise your hands to heaven and swear you will both be true to me. Never betray me in any way, so help you God.'

"His brother and I repeated the vow after him. Then Houdini kissed me and shook Theodore's hand. 'I know you will keep that sacred oath,' he said.

"By this time I was in a state of panicky terror. The eerie sky, the lonely bridge in a waste of marshland, the black water—and then this dramatic and terrible vow—these things seemed wholly abnormal and strange. It was apparent that this Houdini whom I had known less than two weeks was an inexplicable person, probably a madman, and his brother was no better. I glanced at the black water and wondered what those two strangers intended to do to me next in that lonely place. As soon as I got to a firm road, to a lighted street, I would make a break for it and find my way home to my mother.

"But there were no more dramatics that night. Houdini sensed my fears and immediately began to lead me away and reassure me. By the time we reached the lighted streets his gentleness and tenderness had restored my tranquillity.

"Then came a night when I really fled from Houdini, convinced that I had married the devil.

"That evening Houdini laughingly remarked that I had never told him the first name of my father, who had died some years before. He told me to write the name on a piece of paper, crumple it in my hand, and then burn it in the gas jet without showing it to him. After the paper was burned he said: 'Now give me the ashes.'

"Thereupon he bared his forearm and rubbed the ashes on the under part, and immediately my father's name, Gebhardt, appeared on the skin in letters of blood.

"I was paralyzed with fear. Then, slowly, a full realization of the significance of this diabolical thing dawned on me. In my early folk-lore, the devil, disguised as a handsome young man, lured girls to destruction. It was clear to me that I had married the devil. Stealthily, my eyes on Houdini, I backed toward the door, and then turned suddenly and ran, screaming frantically, from the room and from the house. Houdini made after me and soon caught me up in his arms. 'Silly kid, it was only a trick,' he cried reassuringly. 'Oh, let me go! Let me go!' I screamed, biting and kicking him in a frenzy of terror. Finally he quieted me, but it was not until after we had returned to the room and he showed me how the simple trick was done that I became completely reassured.

"By such demonstrations he gradually drove away my superstitions. Among other things he taught me the secret of mind-reading and all the arts of legerdemain, including how to go into trances and tell fortunes. My inside view of the mechanism of such phenomena did more than any-

thing else to exorcise the ghosts and hobgoblins that had peopled my world.

"In due time I learned that while Houdini had attacked my superstitions relentlessly, he duly preserved certain little taboos of his own. For instance, he, who was ordinarily without fear, and deliberately risked his life in dangerous public exhibitions week after week for many years, would take no risks whatever on Friday the thirteenth. On that day he would cut out all hazardous acts from his stage show and would perform no outdoor feats. On one occasion he had been advertised to release himself from handcuffs and straight-jacket while suspended head downward from a very tall building on a Friday the thirteenth. There was always danger of a mischance and a fatal fall, in such dizzy exhibitions, and Houdini's assistants realized that if Houdini gave a thought to the date he would simply quit. Accordingly they fixed up a false calendar, and displayed it prominently in his dressing-room, so that for Houdini that day was the fourteenth and he played his dangerous part successfully. Fortunately he seldom noticed dates, so it was easy to fool him. . . .

"During the short period before Houdini's partnership with his brother Theodore was dissolved, I became pretty well acclimatized to my new environment. Shortly after the dissolution, the début of 'the Houdinis—Harry and Bessie,' described in our early playbills as 'Master Monarchs of Modern Mystery,' was made, in an obscure concert hall. This partnership lasted through Houdini's life."

IV

THE only newspaper that noted the début of the Great Houdinis, as they presently called themselves, was a four-page weekly devoted to show gossip, *The Coney Island Clipper*. In its issue of July 28, 1894, this paper carried a half-column blurb, the first paragraph of which ran as follows:

"The brothers Houdini, who for years have mystified the world by their mysterious box mystery, known as 'Metamorphosis,' are no more and the team will hereafter be known as the Houdinis. The new partner is Miss Bessie Raymond (sic!), the petite soubrette, who was married to Mr. Harry Houdini on July 22 by Rev. G. S. Loui, of Brooklyn. Harry has bought his brother's interest in the act, and he and Miss Bessie Raymond will hereafter perform it."

Houdini lost no time in getting out a flamboyant playbill, bearing the mark of an imaginary English printer and setting forth some fictitious past triumphs in the English halls. In this first playbill Metamorphosis was accurately if somewhat quaintly described.

The Great Houdinis had very humble beginnings. Precarious weekly engagements in small beer halls and dime museums made up their beat, and they were glad to fill them. Ten shows or more a day formed their regular routine, and their combined salary was usually twenty dollars a week. Their greatest earnings in one week during this

THE HOUDINIS

PRESENT THEIR MARVELLOUS MYSTERY

METAMORPHOSIS

EXCHANGE MADE IN 3 SECONDS

The Greatest Novelty Mystery Act in the World!

All the Apparatus used in this Act is inspected by a Committee selected from the Audience.

Mons. Houdini's hands are fastened behind his back, is securly tied in a bag and the knots are sealed, then placed in a massive box which is locked and strapped, the box is then rolled into a small cabinet, and Mlle. Houdini draws the curtain and claps her hands three times, at the last clap of her hands the curtain is drawn open by Mons. Houdini and Mlle. Houdini has disappeared, and upon the box being opened She is found in his place in the bag, the seals unbroken and her hands tied in precisely the same manner as was Mons. Houdini's when first entering the bag.

Just think over this, the time consumed in making the change is THREE SECONDS.!

We challenge the World to produce an act done with greater Mystery Speed or Dexterity.

Respectfully yours THE HOUDINI'S.

period were sixty dollars, but this was rare good fortune, of course.

The small beer hall, with its grubby and often boozy patrons, its shuffling waiters with their incredibly filthy white aprons, its peculiar atmosphere of beer slops and stale tobacco smoke and its sketchy topical show, has now vanished from the American scene. In its day it was an institution with a certain class of the population. Along the coast, at least, its patrons always included a sprinkling of sailors, usually not quite sober. Among all the spectators there was a rough camaraderie, which they extended to the performers. They took a soggy pleasure in the show, and the more alcoholic ones were most vociferous in expressing appreciation or disapproval. Loud hoots and chorused cries of "Git the hook!" were the portion of the luckless performer who failed to excite their artistic appreciation. An astonishing proportion of them seemed to be regulars who came night after night and week after week to witness virtually the same performance with slight weekly changes of personnel. Occasionally fist fights would break out among them, and then the burly bouncers would descend upon the combatants and throw them into the street without ceremony.

"In those early job-seeking days I was sometimes more of a handicap than an asset," Mrs. Houdini relates. "I was a frail little thing, weighing less than a hundred pounds. The boyish figure had not yet come into its own. It was the period when hips were hips and women prided themselves on bust measurements which today would send

them frantically to a diet of carrots and prunes. Even on the meanest stage, the call was all for generously curved amazons, 175 pounds on the hoof, and the managers looked askance at my uncompromising flatness. Once, when work was scarce in both dime museums and halls, and we tried almost despairingly to break into a burlesque show, the manager took one disgusted glance at me and cried: 'What the hell d'you think I'm running? A kindergarten?' "

If the audiences in the beer halls were an uninspiring lot, the performers were a motley company. They included wrecks who had seen better days, others whose future was jeopardized by various weaknesses and addictions, beginners in various stages of amateurishness, and a few women who seemed born to do a beer-hall turn and to keep on doing it as long as their voices could creak out a ditty and the large limbs could be moved in at least a pretense of rhythm.

The companies would meet at the beginning of the week, supposedly ready to work together without further formality. They had rooms, usually somewhere in the same building as the hall, and they ate together poorly served and not always appetizing, but sustaining, beer-hall chow.

The performance began with an ensemble piece, but no rehearsals were held. The ensembles were usually pretty much the same, a few stand-bys serving everywhere, and each person fitted into his or her part more or less spontaneously. The favorite was called "Over the River

Charlie," a simple piece in which melodrama mixed aimlessly with farce. Mrs. Houdini was invariably the ingénue, in "Over the River Charlie" as in other pieces. When the curtain went up she would be discovered seated pensively on a paper rock or a grass plot or a park bench, according to the available props. She would wring her hands and cry: "I wonder where Charlie is? What can be keeping Charlie?" Then Charlie would come dashing gallantly in and take her in his arms, and the pale suggestion of a plot would begin to unfold.

Sometimes, at the first performance at a hall, she would not have seen Charlie until his initial stage entrance. On one memorable occasion when Charlie came rushing out in response to her cue, he proved to be a burly negro. Houdini came running after him and stopped the show with his protests, and as a result the manager had both Houdinis pushed firmly into the street and the stage door slammed behind them.

After the ensemble would come turns and turns and turns. Mrs. Houdini did a song-and-dance act. Houdini did the handcuff act, sleight of hand, magic. They did the trunk trick together.

The dime museums were somewhat less rough, but usually involved longer hours and more strenuous toil. Whenever they were desperate for work, Houdini would wire to Chicago, and Mr. Hedges, manager of Kohl and Middleton's, would send carfare and give them an engagement.

They worked on what was called the Curio Stage,

where all the freaks were exhibited. Ten to twenty shows a day were the rule. Houdini would do the handcuff escapes alone at every other show, so that his wife's performances—she sang and danced—would be cut to a maximum of ten, for she was never in robust health. The handcuff act, however, attracted little attention, for in those early days Houdini seemed unable to sell his audiences on it.

The daily schedule of hours was most exacting. They were required to be on the platform from ten o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night. Between the acts Mrs. Houdini would make up card tricks and sell them. Houdini visited gambling houses at night, after hours, and bought the used cards cheap. From this side line they sometimes made more than their salary.

Mr. Hedges was a hard man who enforced his time schedule rigidly. If the Houdinis were only a few seconds late he would greet them with an outburst of objurgations and curses, which not infrequently would drive Mrs. Houdini to hysterical weeping. Houdini, always confident of the future, would take her in his arms and say: "Never mind, darling. Some day we will tell him to go to hell."

One morning, when they were playing a concert hall in a small town in Wisconsin, Mrs. Houdini was reading one of the local papers when her eye caught this astonishing notice:

"Challenge! I, the undersigned, have deposited with the manager of the —— Theater One Hundred Dol-

lars ($100), which I will forfeit to the person who can handcuff me so I cannot escape.

"Harry Houdini
"Handcuff King and Jail-Breaker."

The item nearly frightened her out of her wits. One hundred dollars! She had never seen so much money. She rushed to Houdini, who shamefacedly admitted that he had saved that amount, but dared not tell her for fear she would demand a new coat.

The sudden affluence filled Beatrice Houdini with pride. She clipped the item and promptly mailed it to her sister Stella, who had surreptitiously kept her in clothes since her marriage. Stella naturally showed the clipping to her mother, who immediately fainted. The poor woman had only the vaguest notion of how the man her daughter had married supported himself, but she now gathered from the clipping that Beatrice was married to a jail-breaker.

The next time the Houdinis drifted back to Kohl and Middleton's, Mrs. Houdini purposely arrived at the first performance two minutes late. Mr. Hedges thumped his stick on the floor and began bawling at her in a manner unusual even for him. When he paused for breath, she walked up to him and said: "Go to hell, Mr. Hedges. We have one hundred dollars and we don't need your old dime museum."

Houdini was aghast at his wife's temerity. He realized how ill they could afford to lose that occasional sure

refuge when other jobs failed; so he began stammering apologies while he waited for the manager to blast them.

Instead of that a grin spread slowly over the grim face of Mr. Hedges, and suddenly he patted the young woman on the shoulder.

"I like your spunk, kid," he said, "but get the hell up on your platform."

They had several small engagements at Huber's Museum, on Fourteenth Street, New York. They knew all the Huber freaks of that period, including the famous Turtle Boy, who was neither boyish nor at all like a turtle out of business hours. On Houdini's first engagement there, he arrived simultaneously with the first electric chair, acquired by Huber from the Auburn prison, where it had first been used to kill Kemmler, the murderer, in 1890. When Huber's and its effects were put on the auction block in 1910, Houdini, the indefatigable collector, parked himself at the sale, and the first day he came home in a cab triumphantly bearing the historic chair, which he had acquired, as he explained, "for sentimental reasons," for a bid of $6.70. His wife was never able to get this gruesome and unlovely relic out of the house. Whenever she had it quietly removed to the cellar, Houdini missed it and had it brought upstairs again.

Every morning Houdini would be out of bed at five and off to the market where he would buy for the day such things as their slender purse permitted. On the way back he would drop into a restaurant and fetch the morning

coffee in a tin can. While his wife straightened up the little furnished room, he would be out in all sorts of weather, visiting barrooms, buying cards, doing tricks to pay for them. Usually he was offered drinks. As he never used alcohol, he became an adept at refusing without causing resentment.

Once when the Houdinis were playing at Huber's, E. F. Albee, the youthful manager of the Keith circuit, who had a habit of prowling about looking for talent, drifted into the museum and watched the show. Houdini's handcuff act made a great impression on him. When he described it to his business associates, however, and suggested engaging Houdini, they declared that no dime museum performer could possibly be good enough for their houses. Mr. Albee, none the less, continued to keep an eye on Houdini and eventually got him an engagement at the Keith house in Boston. He was the first Houdini fan among the eastern managers and remained one of Houdini's closest friends to the end. "I saw every one of Houdini's tricks and stunts," he once remarked, "and I haven't the least idea how he did a single one of them."

However, long before Houdini played Keith's, he received a summons which he thought might prove a shortcut to fame. This was at the beginning of 1895—he was twenty years old—and he and his wife were filling obscure engagements in the South. He was appearing at a concert hall owned by Captain West, grandfather of George

West, the dancer, when he received a wire from an agent announcing that he and his wife were booked to play Tony Pastor's in New York.

Tony Pastor's! Houdini could hardly believe it. That famous hall was still in its glory in the nineties, a national institution, as well known in its way as its immediate neighbor, Tammany Hall. Houdini was so excited by the prospect that he spent all his money advertising in the theatrical papers: "Next week at Tony Pastor's—The Great Houdinis, Harry and Bessie." Captain West advanced the fare to New York.

Alighting from the train, the Houdinis went at once to the theater. On the posters, in the very smallest type, stood their names. The features of that date were Maggie Cline and Bessie Bonehill, though they happened to be resting that week as Miss Cline had a cold. Her big song, "Throw Him Down, McCloskey," seemed destined to run on there forever and ever.

They had three shows a day, and the Houdinis were billed in the awkward opening position for each one. They appeared at 10:30 in the morning, at 12:30, and again at 6:30 in the evening. But it was Tony Pastor's, and they were happy.

How thrilled they were when they walked out on the stage for their first show! The cleaning-women had hardly finished, and were still in evidence with their pails and mops. Instead of an orchestra there was only a lone pianist. Barely twenty-five persons were in the house. But Houdini, his head in the air, spoke to them as he did later

to thousands. He had no doubt that such a stage was his proper place.

After the first show, however, the Houdinis waited, like two scared children, for some hint of how their act was liked by the management. Not a soul came near them. They did the second show. Still no one came to give them any comment. They were just going down the maze of back-stage staircases for the third show when they ran into Maggie Cline and Bessie Bonehill.

The novices, in no little awe, were slipping past the two stars, when suddenly Maggie Cline stopped Mrs. Houdini.

"My God, child!" she exclaimed. "Who made you up?"

"I did it myself," stammered Bess.

The older woman smiled. "Come in here, kid," she said. "Let me fix you."

She led Mrs. Houdini into her dressing-room. In a few minutes, after her practical fingers had done their work, the young performer hardly recognized her own reflection in the glass. As finishing touches, Maggie Cline fixed a bow here, pinned a flower on the shoulder and then casually asked what sort of act her young friend did.

"Why, we are the Great Houdinis," was the reply.

"Indeed! And what do the Great Houdinis do?"

Mrs. Houdini explained as well as she could. Then Maggie Cline called out: "Tony, I'm going to watch this kid's act."

There stood the great Tony Pastor himself. There was

no time, however, for wonder or embarrassment. With a word of thanks the girl joined Houdini in the wings, and when he saw her he stared in amazement and then gasped his admiration.

"Maggie Cline, Tony Pastor, and Bessie Bonehill are seeing our act," she whispered, and the next minute they went on.

How they did work! They put all their hearts and souls into it. Houdini had the air of playing before a royal family.

Later, in the dressing-room, they sat trembling. After a time came a knock and Tony Pastor entered.

"Well, you kids do a fine act," he said. "I'm going to give you a better place tomorrow."

Thereafter they were fourth instead of opening, and the cleaning-women saw them no more.

That night they loitered about, waiting to see Maggie Cline and Bessie Bonehill, and finally they heard Maggie Cline's cheery voice: "Say, you Great Houdinis, you are great," was her warm greeting.

Bessie Bonehill they never saw again after that week, but once, years later, while they were playing Keith's in Boston, there was Maggie Cline on the bill; it was her last season. Times had changed, and Houdini was the big feature of the show. In fact he played eleven successive weeks in Boston in that one theater, and at the conclusion of his record-breaking run Paul Keith presented him with a Tiffany watch.

There was Maggie Cline—and she did not remember

TONY PASTOR'S THEATRE,

14th Street, bet. Third and Fourth Avenues,

NEW YORK CITY.

New York, Feb 4 1895

The Houdinis act as performed here I found
Satisfactory and interesting

Tony Pastor

them! Mrs. Houdini sat for hours recalling to her what she did for them, but Maggie Cline could conjure up only a faint recollection of that great day of their lives. But after seeing Houdini perform, she repeated her earlier opinion: "Houdini, you are great," she said. "I don't remember saying it years ago, but I can hand it to you now."

The week at Tony Pastor's did not prove any open sesame to fame even though they carried away with them an indorsement written by the mighty Tony himself. "The Houdinis' act as performed here I found satisfactory and interesting," he wrote. But that terse line did not make Houdini. For players and politicians alike, fame follows publicity. Houdini's minor act, in the worst position on Tony Pastor's bill, was naturally ignored by the New York papers. No dramatic reporter would have thought of coming to the theater at the unholy hour of 10:30 A.M., or during the lunch hour, or during dinner time. Houdini had not yet learned the peculiar art of dramatizing his great skill to compel the attention of news editors. He was really great, but his greatness got no advertising in big-town newspapers, and he had years of struggle ahead of him before the name Houdini began to appear in the news in New York, Chicago, and other large cities, and the magnates who performed the miracle of booking on the big-time circuits began to take notice.

V

FAILING to break into first-class engagements by way of Tony Pastor's, the Houdinis in the spring of 1895 joined Welsh Brothers' Circus, a ten-twent'-thirt' show without animals, which toured the smaller eastern towns during the open season.

Mrs. Houdini relates the circus episode as follows:

"We first joined the circus at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. We arrived in a night of drenching rain with a howling gale and stumbled about through ankle-deep mud for miles in the dark, trying to find the tent. At last a voice from out of the darkness hailed us. 'Is that the Houdinis?' Houdini shouted an affirmative, and the next instant we were pulled into what looked like a great black cave. It was the car—an old truck transformed into living quarters. In a minute a lantern flashed in our faces, and we were confronted by a huge, kindly-faced man with the walrus mustaches of the period. He was Welsh, our boss.

" 'Well, what do you do?' he asked, looking us over.

" 'Anything,' was Houdini's prompt reply.

" 'The first thing you do with this outfit is to work in the sideshow,' said the boss. 'You do Punch and Judy; the wife, mind-reading. In the concert Houdini to do magic, wife to sing and dance—then your trunk trick, and the handcuff act as the big feature. And, of course, you are in the parade. Twenty-five a week and cakes.'

"Twenty-five a week had a clear meaning for us, but

The Mighty Cavalcade is Coming. Season 1898.

FIVE TIMES MORE COMPREHENSIVE AND GORGEOUS THAN ANY PREVIOUS YEAR.

10th Triumphant Tour of the Giant Attraction.

WELSH BROS.
NEWEST GREAT R.R. SHOWS
JOHN WELSH
M. H WELSH.
Equal Owners and Directors
POSITIVELY THE MOST COMPLETE POPULAR PRICED TENTED EXPOSITION IN CHRISTENDOM
PERMANENT ADDRESS & WINTER HEADQUARTERS AT LANCASTER, PA.

To Whom it may Concern 1898

We can cheerfully recommend Harry and Beatrice Houdini with their unique and mysterious act called "Metamorphosis" as being the strongest drawing card of its class in America, their act is totally unlike others and always creates a profound impression upon their auditors. They were the especially engaged feature of our Concert during the touring season of 1895 and also the past season (1897) for a period of twenty five weeks. They are artists of the front line and gentlemen in a lady and gentlemen in all that the term implies and can always find room with any of our amusement enterprises.

We will be pleased to play them at any time. The Houdinis are truly great people.

Yours Very Truly
Welsh Bros
Mgrs & Props. Welsh Bros Shows

Lancaster Penna
Monday Oct 8th 1898

'cakes' was a mystery. Later we learned that it meant meals.

"We were then taken down a narrow passageway to our bunk. On the way Mr. Welsh shouted: 'Here are the Houdinis!' and a chorus of voices came from various points in the darkness crying, 'Welcome to our city,' and similar greetings.

"Our lodging was a mere cupboard partitioned off in the car, with a flimsy curtain for a door. Within was just a cot, no chair, table, or bureau. In fact there was room only for a cot. A cardboard partition separated us from the next apartment, in which low voices rumbled. Still soaking wet, dismayed at the strange environment, the darkness, the cramped quarters, I fell on the cot sobbing. Houdini soothed me. He was already engaged in thinking out little rimes for my songs, and acted so thoroughly at home that I was shamed out of some of my terror.

"The next morning I awoke to find the sun streaming through a little hole in the side of our cupboard. Houdini was out already. Hearing the people in the car moving about, I dressed and lifted the curtain. As I stepped out into the corridor, I was greeted by a motherly woman with a charming smile. It was Mrs. McCarthy, gun-juggler.

" 'Are you one of the Houdinis?' she asked.

" 'Yes, I'm Mrs. Houdini.'

" 'You are one of our features, aren't you?'

"I nodded, though I wondered what a 'feature' was.

" 'We'd better hurry, breakfast is ready,' she said, and

led me across a litter of dirty canvases and seats and apparatus of all sorts, through a big tent and finally into a smaller one where there were two long uncovered pine tables with planks on wooden horses for seats. At one table sat a row of the grimmest, most unshaven men I had ever seen. They were canvas men. At the other table sat one woman with a dozen men, the performers. These we joined, just as Houdini came in with Mr. Welsh.

"A waiter plumped down a cup of coffee at my place, asking: 'Ham or —— ?' I looked at Houdini. He said: 'One ham, one "or," ' and every one laughed. It appeared that 'or' meant eggs, and one could not have both.

"We soon accustomed ourselves to the new life. The two other women with the show were very kind and did everything to make me feel at home. One of them fashioned a little dress for me to wear in the concert, and they lent me other things. The circus was really a family affair. Most of the performers were related to each other either by blood or by marriage. I always mended the socks of Pud Martin, the show's chef. In return, whenever our tent was pitched conveniently near a farmhouse, fried chicken would appear on my plate on stew nights. I loathed stew. There was never any explanation of how the chicken was procured.

"The show carried no animals but had a banner outside the tent depicting a most ferocious Wild Man. In most towns no one missed the Wild Man, but in one of the one-night stands a crowd of rough young fellows began

to demand him. 'Where's your Wild Man? Where is he?' The cry was gradually taken up through the audience.

"A hasty back-stage consultation was held, and Houdini volunteered to add the Wild Man to his repertoire. An old wooden cage was found for him, he rumpled his hair (which, in those days, he wore long and bushy), improvised clothes out of some old sacks, and with the addition of a little touching up of his features, was transformed into something effectively wild as he groveled on the floor of his cage and growled.

"The ringmaster, Clinton Newton, who could talk politely and sonorously about anything or nothing, made a preliminary address about the capture of the Wild Man in the depths of the Java jungle after he had terrorized the countryside, and described how he lived on a diet of raw meat, cigarettes, and cigars. Then the cage was drawn in, with Houdini growling and tearing at a bit of raw meat.

"The Wild Man was an immediate hit, and became a permanent feature. He was a hit with the male performers as well as with the audiences, for men showered him with cigars and cigarettes to hear him growl, and as Houdini did not use tobacco the rest of the men of the troupe enjoyed free smokes. In fact all our acts went well with one exception. That was the handcuffs. Houdini was still unable to give the public a thrill with this pet trick of his own invention. Every week he seemed to be giving a more difficult and intricate performance with the irons.

An audience of police chiefs would have been amazed at his skill and technique, but our small-town American spectators were utterly cold to it. The majority of them apparently assumed that Houdini was using prepared cuffs.

"However, on one occasion, Houdini's cleverness with locks at least served his associates well. One Sunday he gave a show at a little place near Providence, Rhode Island, and a zealous blue-law sheriff arrested the whole troupe for violating the Sunday law. When the sheriff gathered us in, Mr. Welsh had left for a flying trip to New York, so we had no defender. After a brief hearing the sheriff locked us all in the town jail overnight, pending a further disposition of our case.

"In the lockup the Fat Woman wept bitterly. Her cell was too small, and she was wholly uncomfortable and miserable. So after the sheriff had gone off and everything was quiet, Houdini deftly picked the locks of the jail and the whole company stole quietly back to the big tent. The next day Mr. Welsh arrived to fix matters with the sheriff, and we pulled up our stakes and went quietly away from there.

"We had only two clowns with the circus, two serious-minded middle-aged men. The tragedy of their lives was that they could not sing, for they had the songbook privilege for the show, and, with no one to sing the songs, they could not sell the books. They were overjoyed when they found that I could make a stab at singing. They dressed me as a clown, put me on a chair, and I sang verses of all

the more catching songs, for which I received the large sum of two dollars for fourteen shows. My, but I was proud of that money! I felt that I earned it all myself.

"Houdini and another performer had the privilege of selling soap and toilet articles. This brought in a little income. Our combined salary was twenty-five dollars a week, and as we had our meals free, Houdini was able to bank the salary except twelve dollars a week which he sent to his mother. We felt that we were becoming people of substance.

"Each night after the show the whole company would hunt up some lunch room and put in a substantial extra meal of whatever they could get. On the night of our wedding anniversary I asked all the circus folk to have coffee with us—we could hardly afford a larger treat—but by the time we got to the village all the places were closed. Angry and disappointed, I berated Houdini soundly for not making advance arrangements. As we straggled back, I flounced into our cubbyhole, threw back the sheet of our cot, and discovered, hidden beneath it, a wonderful chicken dinner cooked to a turn. That day Houdini had been talking with a local clergyman and his wife. In the course of the conversation he had told the story of our elopement, and as a result the clergyman's wife had cooked this delightful dinner for us. I ate that dinner with tears streaming down my cheeks, but Houdini had no word of reproach for my outburst of temper.

"Later, however, there was a most serious quarrel.

"He had forbidden me to go to a certain show which bobbed up in a town where we were playing. I was just as determined to go. He said the show was unfit for me, and if I disobeyed him he would spank me and send me home. Naturally after that warning I went to the show. He followed me, carried me out, spanked me thoroughly, divided all our poor savings, led me firmly to the railroad station, bought my ticket to Bridgeport where my sister lived, and put me on the train, placing our pet dog in my hands just before the train pulled out.

"At the last minute, lifting his hat courteously, he said: 'I always keep my word. Good-by, Mrs. Houdini.'

"My heart was breaking, and I was on the edge of hysteria, but the memory of the spanking rankled and enabled me to reply with a pretense of calm dignity: 'Good-by, Mr. Houdini.'

"Houdini had wired for my sister to meet me, and when I arrived, at six in the evening, there was not much left of me save a capacity for tears and recriminations. My brother-in-law, who adored me, promised to thrash Houdini if he ever met him. I was duly petted and fussed over, and was convinced that I was a badly abused female. Yet I was very unhappy, and in my heart I was ready to cry quits and even beg forgiveness on my knees.

"Six hours later, at 2 A.M., the bell rang and I heard Houdini's voice. I flew to the door, and we fell into each other's arms weeping. 'See, darling,' said Houdini, 'I told you I would send you away if you disobeyed, but I didn't say I wouldn't fly after you and bring you back.'

"We returned to the circus, were forgiven by all for deserting the show, and then and there resolved never again to let family quarrels go to extremes.

"As we were both quick-tempered we had to develop a technique to avoid domestic flare-ups. Our system of signals whereby we could converse quietly in the midst of company was helpful. One of Houdini's cues was the raising of the left eyelid three times. This was the signal for me to be quiet, as I was committing some indiscretion—and doubtless Houdini used it more than any other signal in our code.

"One day, at a gathering of friends, I was relating an intimate story. Repeatedly Houdini gave me the cue to hold my tongue, but I chose to ignore it. Finally he excused himself and went out. In a little while a messenger appeared with a telegram for me. It read: 'Darling, you talk too damn much.'

"Always, after the quarrel during the circus days, whenever I got angry, Houdini would leave the house and walk slowly around the block. In a few minutes he would open the door and toss his hat into the room. If it was not thrown out again, he would enter. If the hat was thrown out, he would go away for another few minutes.

"On one occasion my bad temper made me obdurate to Houdini's overture of the hat. He had been putting a new electric light bulb in my room for me, and he dropped the bulb, which shattered to bits on the floor. I upbraided him severely for his carelessness. He got a second bulb, and in his agitation this also slipped from his fingers and was

smashed. On that, I treated him to an unbridled outburst and he hastily left the house. After some minutes, according to his custom, he cautiously slipped the door open and tossed his hat in. I promptly flung it out. This performance was repeated several times, at intervals. Then he vanished for an hour. At the end of that time a messenger appeared with an envelope on which this legend was typewritten: 'To be delivered in a Hurry to Mrs. Houdini, then Exit Rapidly.' Within were these formal words: 'Mr. Houdini wishes to inform Mrs. Houdini that the globe fell out of his hand, but the second one slipped. He wishes to convey his sorrow and promises that the one that fell will never fall again.—Mr. Houdini, Friend Husband.'

"It was impossible to be angry very long with a husband like that."

VI

At the end of the circus season Houdini had saved nearly all his salary. This money he was induced to invest in the first of a number of unfortunate business ventures, for Houdini was a poor business man. He trusted every one in business matters, and persons who played on his romantic bent found it easy to work him up to an enthusiasm for projects concerning the financial details of which he remained uninformed.

This first essay was a half-interest in a faltering burlesque show called "The American Gaiety Girls." At the time, as it turned out, the most tangible thing connected with this concern was its debts, but Houdini set to work gallantly to make it go.

He would do anything sensational to draw crowds, but he had one rigid taboo. He abhorred smut and would never tolerate it.

As a result of this strict rule the newspapers generally bestowed high encomiums on the show. "Strictly moral and clean, and able to be enjoyed by ladies as well as gentlemen," was the verdict of one organ of civic uplift. However, there were certain strongholds of Puritanism where one feature, "The Champion Lady Wrestler," in a slightly abbreviated costume, and the daring "New Woman Chorus," in bicycle bloomers and shirtwaists, were criticized as possibly dangerous to the high standard

of community virtue. In the nineties it was good form to be shocked.

Though he could ban smut from his show, Houdini was not always able to assert his authority successfully in other respects. One night at curtain time the two comedians were discovered sleeping the sleep of the soused, and they could not be wakened. Houdini and his cousin, Henry Newman, who was the advance agent, had to make up hastily for the parts. Houdini had to play the drum and also sing. As a comedian he was a complete failure, and his singing was appalling. The audience howled its disapprobation.

Nor were his troubles ended there. The villain, who in one scene had to kidnap Mrs. Houdini, was also in a state of alcoholic paralysis. There was no one to take his place. The troupe included two child performers—Tiddlywinks and his brother—who did a specialty. They were merely tiny boys, but as a last resort they were pressed into service as kidnapers.

When the time arrived for Mrs. Houdini to be kidnaped, poor Tiddlywinks tried to pick her up, but she was twice as big as he. So as he shouted in a shrill treble, "We will now steal the gur-r-r-lll!" she tucked the villain under her arm and ran off stage. The business made such a hit that it remained in the show.

But it had not long to remain. Despite Houdini's heroic efforts, his first managerial venture sank slowly on the rocks. There was a period when the Great Houdinis had scarcely enough to eat. The chorus girls had their ad-

mirers, who often bought meals for them, and not infrequently one of them would send the boss's wife a sandwich paid for by some stage-door Johnnie—and she would be very glad to get it. The kindness of the girls was the more notable because usually there would be no salary for them in the till. The venture left Houdini with some debts, which were paid off as soon as possible.

At the close of that chapter Houdini tied up with an interesting character named Marco. Marco's real vocation was that of organist in a church in his home town of Bridgeport, Connecticut. But he was incidentally an amateur magician, and this interest lured him into the show business. He had a modest fortune, and this he used to outfit and route an elaborate show, in which he engaged the Houdinis to do the handcuff and the trunk tricks. Their first trip was to Nova Scotia.

Marco billed Mrs. Houdini as his daughter and Houdini as his son-in-law and successor. His introductory speech at each performance began: "Ladies and gentlemen: Being now on my farewell tour, I have retired from all hazardous work and will introduce my daughter and her husband, Houdini, who is my successor, and who will do my famous handcuff act," etc. As Marco did not know one handcuff from another, the Houdinis were always vastly amused at that phrase.

Marco paid well and was extremely kind, but the show was a failure. It dwindled until the Houdinis and Jack Kearny, who was manager, carpenter, stage crew, actor,

and confidential adviser to Marco, comprised the entire troupe.

During his career with Marco, Houdini, who was trying to develop the publicity technique so necessary to put across good work, thought he would draw attention to the show by freeing himself from a running horse to which he had been roped. The stunt was to be pulled off on a public highway. Unfortunately a romantic livery man provided for the performance a young, newly-broken horse, instead of the docile beast on which Houdini had counted, and the self-deliverer found himself dashing across the fields at breakneck speed, in danger of being flung under the flying hoofs as soon as he freed himself.

Houdini's only chance lay in making the horse run until he was exhausted, so each time it began to lessen its speed he struggled and kicked to force it to renewed effort. This strategy worked. When the horse was finally too weak to be goaded farther, Houdini was able to free himself without danger.

Marco at last gave up, and Houdini took over the show from him. Marco returned to the States, wishing his successor better fortune than he had had. Houdini's luck, alas, was worse!

The tour had degenerated, literally, to barnstorming, with an occasional church or schoolhouse for variety. At last there was but ten dollars left in the treasury. All the curtains, and such props as were not essential, had gone for rent, board, and other items of expense. That night they rented a church for eight dollars, paid in advance.

The Houdinis stood in the street shouting and ballyhooing for the multitude to come in to see the greatest show on earth. The multitude came, to the extent of ten dollars; so after paying for the hauling of their baggage and for a lodging for the night, the treasury was practically a vacuum. The next night they slept in a hallway, and the two men gave Mrs. Houdini their coats to lie on.

The following morning they walked to where a boat was leaving for Boston. They determined to get on that boat, and after a consultation Mrs. Houdini went to the captain alone to do the cry-baby act. She had played the pathetic with varying success, on several previous occasions, when they wanted to get baggage through without paying much excess.

Exaggeration was scarcely necessary in telling this hard-luck story to the captain. They were willing to give a show for the passengers to pay their way.

Fortunately the captain was a kindly soul. He consented, and with relief the three lugged their baggage on board. By that time it had dwindled to one big trunk containing the apparatus of magic and a few collapsible tables.

Mrs. Houdini at once set about unpacking the magic, in the ship's lounge, to set up the show. The sea air made her ravenously hungry, and as she worked she looked longingly into the dining-room where the passengers were eating and waiters were hurrying to and fro with heavily laden trays. This sight, and the tantalizing odors that came from the kitchen, nearly drove her wild.

At last the passengers began drifting into the lounge. Word had been passed around about the entertainment.

Kearny had donned his best show clothes. Mrs. Houdini's part of the work was done. They waited for the Great Houdini until the passengers grew restive.

When he finally appeared, the Great Houdini was white as a ghost and his clever hands were shaking as with a palsy. In a weak, hollow voice he tried to start his explanatory speech, but the effort was too much for him. He lurched forward and nearly fell to the floor. Then he began bleeding at the nose. Kearny led him away to the deck—just in time. This was their first knowledge that Houdini suffered from seasickness. He never did anything by halves, and his seasickness was on the grand scale. The mere act of buying the tickets for his various trips abroad almost invariably brought on a violent nausea.

After Houdini's disappearance his wife stood helpless among the carefully laid-out paraphernalia. The audience did not know whether to laugh or be sorry, but when they saw the tears in her eyes they repressed their mirth.

One woman suggested that Mrs. Houdini should do the tricks; so for the moment she essayed the rôle of a lady magician. She had always fixed the "gimicks" for Houdini, but of course she could do only the simpler mechanical stunts, and these she attempted, trying to imitate Houdini's flow of comedy. Her efforts, however, were pitiful, and after she had bungled through two tricks a gentleman picked up a hat and began passing it among the spectators. By this time they were all laughing, but it

was kindly laughter, and they poured twenty-five dollars into the hat. Mrs. Houdini could hardly wait to get to the men to tell them of the little fortune. Houdini was lying on the deck, his eyes closed, his face a greenish-gray color. His wife's first thoughtless words, after telling him about the money, were: "May I spend some for eats?"

Houdini opened his eyes and fastened them on her with a glance of weary malevolence and disgust: "No!" he shouted.

"I think," says Mrs. Houdini, "it was the only really bitter word he ever addressed to me in all our thirty-three years together.

"However, I did eat. I reëntered the lounge to gather up our apparatus, and the same kind woman who suggested that I give the show asked me if I would like something to eat. The look in my eyes answered her. She took me into the grand dining-room, and I gorged myself with food."

After they reached Boston, they began a period of drifting about the country, getting transitory engagements at beer halls and museums.

They found themselves stranded and out of a job in St. Louis in cold weather. Their baggage was held at the station with twenty dollars due on it. Houdini procured a hall bedroom for which they paid $1.50 for one week, and that virtually cleaned them out. The unheated room was like a tomb, too cold to stay in during working hours, though it contained a rickety iron stove which at first they

were afraid to try; so they crashed the gate at various theaters to keep warm. They had free entrance to the vaudeville houses, though Houdini had never played them. After the close of the matinée, on the first day, they passed a grocery store that was just locking up. Like two children they stole a few potatoes, and on the curb they gathered up pieces of some broken wooden boxes. Then, laughingly, they hurried back to their little furnished room.

They made a fire in the rickety stove, roasted their potatoes, and sat on the floor feasting, for the quarters were innocent of chairs. Thus they lived for a week, but the next week and the weeks to follow were altogether uncertain. In Houdini's mind, however, the future was always clearly marked. No matter how black things appeared, the present difficulty was to him merely an incident; success in the end was sure. This faith his wife completely shared.

Toward the end of the week he came home one evening with a whole packing-box for the fire. It was so complete that he obviously hated to break it up, and before tackling it he sat for a long time staring at it. At last, with a sigh, he began to wrench it apart.

"Bess," he said, "I have a new idea for a packing-box escape. I think I can get out without using a trick box. I'll work it out some day, and it will help to make us famous."

In this curious fashion the idea of his famous packing-case escape had its inception.

The next day—room-rent day—he came bounding in with his eyes alight.

"We've got a job, Bess. We are 'The Rahners, Harry and Bess—America's Greatest Comedy Act.' "

He had secured an engagement at Escher's Music Hall as a comedy act! Recalling Houdini's former failure as a comedian, Mrs. Houdini was a bit doubtful about this venture, especially as their things were still firmly held at the railroad station.

"What about costumes?" she asked.

"We'll sew a few patches on my street clothes and I'll make up as a tramp. You dress as a kid. And now, old girl, we'll rehearse."

There was no damping his confidence. Rehearse they did.

Already he had outlined the act. His wife was to open with a song, and after the applause, if any, died away, she would say: "Oh, I'm so scared! A nasty old tramp followed me here." Then, with a rattling of tin cans, Houdini would appear in his tramp make-up, trailing a collection of cans. A scream from the girl. "Don't be afraid, little one. I once had a little girl like you."

He would then recite a bit of silly verse relating how a drunken father caused the death of his baby girl, etc. From this pathos they were to jump into comedy and wind up with a double song and dance.

While he wrote out the cues, Mrs. Houdini fashioned a child's dress from her best nightie and sewed patches

on his worst suit (he had only two, one bad, the other worse), and they were ready to conquer the world.

The concert hall proved about the most dreadful place in their experience. It was without ventilation and apparently had never been cleaned, and most of the patrons looked as if they lodged in convenient gutters. In both the first part, or opening, and the finale, or, as they called it, the after piece, both of which were ensembles, the Houdinis had to do parts. In the first part Mrs. Houdini played a little girl, while Houdini had to do straight for the comedian. Houdini, as comedian, laughed so much at the comedy during rehearsal that the stage manager had repeatedly to reprove him with profane volleys.

Between the first part and the after piece came the specialties. Mrs. Houdini, made up as a newsboy, opened the show and sang a newsboy song, selling papers to the patrons. The audience of human flotsam and jetsam would throw pennies at her as she cried: "Evening News! Evening News! Who'll buy?" and she was so busy picking up the coins that she sang the chorus three times before she heard the stage manager calling her off. The boy's costume, furnished by the house, was miles too big for her, and in her anxiety to get off the stage she almost hopped out of the baggy trousers.

Later, among the other acts, they appeared as "The Rahners, Harry and Bess." Their bathos really made a hit, and at the end of the week the manager booked them for another, "at a cut." Their first week was at thirty dollars; the second, twenty-five. Houdini gathered old

issues of *Puck* and *Judge* from barber shops to concoct a new set of jingles and jokes for their second week.

At the end of the fortnight, as Houdini drew his salary, he said to the manager: "My name is not Rahner. I am really the Great Houdini."

The manager stared at him blankly. "Who in hell is the Great Houdini?" he asked.

Wholly unabashed, Houdini explained to him.

"All right," said the manager finally. "Get your magic stuff out of hock, and if you really are so great, I'll give you your original thirty dollars for a third week."

With the trunk trick they conquered both audience and management, so that still another week was added to their engagement, and as they pocketed the final thirty dollars they felt that they were financially on their feet again.

The concert halls and beer halls were depressing places. They continued to wander about, getting engagements here and there, but they were constantly facing weeks when there was no work, and board and lodging had to be paid for.

At one time during the early days Houdini found himself stranded in New York with only vague chances of future engagements. He was really discouraged at his failure to capture audiences with his wonderful handcuff act. In something like despair he went successively to four of the leading New York newspapers and offered to sell all his secrets, including that of the handcuff act, for twenty dollars. None of the editors displayed the least interest in his offer.

About this time also, Houdini circulated handbills announcing that Professor Houdini had opened a school of magic and was prepared to instruct all comers in the mystic art. To supplement this work he sold the material for tricks, including a trick packing-box for escapes. These things he vended on a commission basis by arrangement with Roterberg of Chicago, who manufactured magical apparatus. The school was first opened in New York and later continued at Chicago, but no great rush of pupils developed. The most devoted student was a very old man in Chicago who had retired from business and had an ambition to astonish his friends. Houdini continued his connection with Roterberg for many years, and long after he ceased acting as agent for Roterberg's apparatus he continued to devise new tricks for him and took great delight in his own inventions.

VII

In the fall of 1897 the Houdinis had a disastrous engagement at a music hall in Milwaukee, at the close of which the manager swindled them out of their salary. Following this came a session at Kohl and Middleton's at Chicago, in the course of which Houdini plunged into a crap game to retrieve his fortunes and lost sixty dollars. This put the pair in serious difficulties. Houdini promised his wife never to gamble again—and kept his promise with fair circumspection. Fortunately at this time came an offer to join Dr. Hill's traveling medicine show, known as The California Concert Company, at twenty-five dollars a week. The Houdinis scraped together enough money to pay their fares and excess baggage to Garnett, Kansas, where the medicine show was playing.

On the trip they had to change cars at 3 A.M. The train was late at the junction point, and the other train, an express, was ready to start. To their horror, there was no one to shift their four heavy trunks. Houdini persuaded some of the passengers to help him transfer this baggage. Staggering under the heavy load, they got two of the four trunks into the express train, while the conductor waited impatiently, watch in hand. At this point he announced that he could wait no longer.

The contract called for the Houdinis to start with the show that day, and as they could do nothing without their baggage, their situation was critical. Moreover, after their

period of brief stands and perpetual job-hunting this was a "permanent" engagement of fifteen weeks, and they looked on it as a turning-point in their fortunes. Houdini pleaded with the conductor to wait for a minute or two until the remaining trunks could be taken aboard, but he was obdurate. To him a schedule was a sacred thing. Pushing Houdini aside, he waved the starting signal to the engineer. The bell began to ring, and the first puff came from the funnel of the locomotive.

The next instant Houdini was sprinting wildly past the locomotive. Just as the train was beginning to jerk ahead, he flung himself face downward across the track, directly in its path.

The brakes ground sharply as the express jolted to an abrupt stop. Then half a dozen trainmen rushed down on Houdini, with cries of profane rage.

"I won't get up until you take my trunks aboard," he said grimly. "Otherwise you can run over me."

Two brakemen seized him round the waist, but they could not budge him. He had dug his fingers about one rail, his toes clung to the other. His muscles were like iron, and he knew the trick of stiffening his body so that Sandow himself would have had difficulty in dislodging him. The trainmen tugged and wrestled with him without avail.

Finally the engineer came running up.

"Say, your damned trunks are on board," he cried. "How about letting us start?"

Houdini had taken such a grip on the rails that the men had to help him get loose. Both his hands and feet were

bruised and bleeding, and his clothes were a sight, but he reached the show on time—with his trunks.

Dr. Hill was a fairly young man, very impressive to look at, with his flowing, ecclesiastical hair and his silky brown beard which suggested a German engraving of Christ. His benign appearance gave no hint of his most unholy thirst. His partner, Dr. Pratt, was a white-haired old gentleman with the air of a retired clergyman.

The outfit appeared on the streets of the small towns in an ancient victoria large enough to carry a small organ. At a convenient corner they would take their stand. Dr. Pratt played the organ and Houdini the tambourine, and Mrs. Houdini sang. After a crowd had collected, Dr. Hill would launch into impressive eloquence on the virtues of his wonderful medicine, which contained all the herbs in the pharmacopoeia and then some, and was a cure for all mortal ills. The man was a natural evangelist and always got results. Houdini would take in the money while the others handed out the bottles. When the last holdout had come forward with his coin, Dr. Hill announced the great show they would give at the Town Hall that evening for the trifling admission fees of ten, fifteen, and twenty-five cents.

The show opened with a playlet. The property man played the hero, Mrs. Houdini's sweetheart. Houdini was the heavy (villain). One night the hero tried to demonstrate a capacity for liquor like Dr. Hill's, with disastrous consequences to both. At curtain time the hero was lying on the floor, snoring loud enough to drown out the organ.

In the emergency old Dr. Pratt had to step into the part of the lover, and a puzzled audience watched Mrs. Houdini respond to his love-making and doubtless wondered at her preference when the villain was such a handsome young man. It was several nights before the property man was fit to take up his usual rôle again.

At Coffeeville, Kansas, one night after the show, two gamblers offered Houdini one hundred dollars to open the rear door of a gambling house after the place had closed for the night. They wanted to "fix" some cards or other paraphernalia. Houdini had no particular moral compunctions—he explained that with gamblers it is a case of dog eat dog—but he knew that if he were surprised in the adventure his life would not be worth a cent. So he refused and returned to the little hotel.

He was just falling asleep when he was aroused to read a telegram from New York. It was on a family matter that necessitated an immediate answer; so he dressed and went to the railroad station. After he had sent his wire he started back. The night was pitch-black, and a drizzle of rain was starting. He had proceeded only a few yards when he felt something cold against his ear.

"We can pick locks, too, young man," said a voice. "Now you come along with us, or we'll turn the key."

It was one of the gamblers. Under this persuasion Houdini went with them. Still covered with the gun, he was led to the rear of the gambling joint. The door to be opened was really a combination of interlocked doors lead-

ing into a cellar, from which they were to make their way to the room where the layouts were. The cellar door opened outward, and after Houdini mastered the lock system and felt the door give, he jerked it out so violently that he knocked one man down against the other.

Houdini leaped inside and snapped the lock to behind him. He supposed himself safe, but one of the enraged gamblers took a shot at him through a cellar grating. Houdini flung up his hand to shield his face and the bullet lodged between the bases of two fingers. He carried it until his death.

Later he found an exit, picked his way out, and stole home to the hotel.

Gradually Houdini became the focal point of the show. One evening, in Lima, Ohio, H. M. Walker, a young newspaper man, entering the public square, saw a boy with a bell and a banner advertising a medicine show featuring "Houdini the Magician—Peerless Prince of Prestidigitators"—at twenty-five dollars a week! The young man followed the boy to a vacant store next to a shooting gallery, the windows of which displayed lithographs showing Houdini in evening clothes, the devil behind him and witches fluttering in the dusky background. He entered and saw Houdini undo his handcuffs, pour a glass of water and change it into ink, and perform expertly various other tricks. He was sufficiently interested to hunt up the magician and have a talk with him.

"I haven't learned to coin my thrill in publicity," Houdini told him. "I think no one can beat me at magic—

but I'm still obscure. It doesn't bother me, however. I know I am going to be famous."

Various acts joined the medicine show for brief periods while the Houdinis were with it. Among these transients were the Keatons, Joe and Myra, not to mention their whimsical-looking infant, Buster, whom Houdini named.

In the opening ensemble piece Joe Keaton did a part that called for a blackface comedian, but as Joe's specialty was brogue, he played it as an Irishman. Mrs. Houdini played the soubrette, Myra Keaton the woman lead, and Houdini straight. Houdini was constantly being convulsed with laughter at Joe's comedy, and on several occasions his uncontrollable mirth almost broke up the show, much to Joe's disgust.

One night, while Mrs. Houdini was doing a song on the stage, she heard a voice cry, "Hogan's Hotel is afire." Joe Keaton was in the dressing-room, and Myra, busy at the piano, did not hear the cry. Mrs. Houdini remembered Buster asleep in the hotel. She jumped over the gas footlights and ran up the aisle, down the street in her short bespangled dress, and into the smoky hotel. She dashed up the stairs and grabbed baby Buster, who was sleeping contentedly. As she reached the lobby, Joe, Myra, and Houdini, followed by most of the audience, were rushing in the door. Mrs. Houdini was not exactly a heroine, for Buster was in no immediate danger save in her imagination. There was ample time for them to salvage all their belongings.

In the course of the Houdinis' engagement with Dr. Hill business suddenly went bad. At the end of a barren week, Dr. Hill, in desperation, asked Houdini to give a spiritualistic séance as a special Sunday show.

Houdini was advertised as "The Celebrated Psychometric Clairvoyant" who "by strange power, when the conditions are favorable, can make tables float through the air, make musical instruments playing sweetest music fly through space, make visible spirit hands and faces in full light." On Sunday night the local Opera House was jammed. The messages and demonstrations given by Houdini caused the greatest astonishment and awe and were doubtless discussed in that town for many a long day. "How could he know all those things about us unless the spirits told him?" was the question every one asked.

The secret of that sensational séance was simple. That Sunday morning Houdini had paid a quiet visit to the village cemetery, accompanied by the village sexton and one Uncle Rufus, the town's most venerable gossip. Both these worthies were "fixed" not to give Houdini away. While Houdini copied the names, dates, and legends from the gravestones, Uncle Rufus and the sexton pumped him full of the intimate personal histories of those who lay beneath.

Houdini had learned so much about the people of the town that after his performance two local business men came to his dressing-room and each offered him twenty-five dollars if he would promise to give no more séances

there. They wanted no more family skeletons rattled in their Opera House.

Of course this feature was so successful that it was immediately added to the show. In those days spiritualistic séances were the fashion, and mind-reading was part of the performance of many magicians. The profession had no fixed standards such as obtain today, thanks largely to the influence of the Society of American Magicians which Houdini helped to mold. The show business was surrounded by a liberal amount of pretentious flim-flam. The public loved to be told that the performer came from a strange land and liked to believe that he was in league with the devil. Accordingly Dr. Hill's request seemed a fair part of the game.

The Houdinis were well prepared for handling spirit messages. Houdini had already taught his wife "mind-reading," for which they used his code system, which included both signals and spoken words. By means of their signals, given through the position of hands or feet, or changes in the facial muscles, they could converse undetected in a crowded theater. Mrs. Houdini, "blindfolded," could tell the date of a coin handed to Houdini by a stranger in the midst of the audience. To the simple onlooker this involved some supernatural psychic ability, but every magician knows how to secure adequate vision, after being securely blindfolded by any volunteer, through a simple shift of the facial muscles.

When one was out of view of the other, the spoken code was used. Their code words for numbers, which the

ANNOUNCEMENT EXTRAORDINARY.

OPERA HOUSE:

SUNDAY, JAN'Y 9.

GREAT TRIPLE BILL.

HOUDINI THE GREAT

Will give Sunday night **A Spiritual Seance** in the Open Light.

Only Time a Seance in Public Ever Given

By HOUDINI except in large cities, and then at advanced prices. HOUDINI'S work the past week in the Opera House releasing himself from hand cuffs, leg fetters, chains and locks was seen and by that strange power, when the conditions are favorable, tables float through the air, musical instruments playing sweetest music, are seen flying through space all the spirit hands and faces are seen in full light. The representative business men of this city have kindly volunteered to act as an investigating committee, which will insure honesty of purpose. The California Concert Company would not perpetrate any imposition perpetrated on its patrons at any rate.

Together with an entire change of programme, the beautiful play,

TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR ROOM

will be presented with an excellent cast.

LA PETITE ALLENE,

the child prodigy, in new songs and dances.

The Invincible Rosar Trio

first time playing on all their musical instruments.

12 STAR PERFORMERS 12

Everything new. Entire change.

Admission, 10, 20 and 30c.

No extra charge for reserved seats. Get seats early at the usual places.

A NIGHT OF MYSTERY.

DON'T FORGET

Matinee, Opera House,

Saturday Afternoon

CALIFORNIA CONCERT COMP'Y

Will give a special matinee to the children of Galena, Saturday afternoon, January 8th, where a specially prepared entertainment calculated to please the children as well as the older ones who attend. We guarantee to give a full show with the same care as the [illegible] performance is given. Bring the little ones and make them happy.

ADMISSION 10 CENTS TO ALL

Seats of the house for everybody. Adults and children same.

A HOUDINI PLAYBILL

Galena, Kansas. Jan. 9, 1898

Houdinis kept secret for thirty-three years, were as follows:

Pray	1
Answer	2
Say	3
Now	4
Tell	5
Please	6
Speak	7
Quickly	8
Look	9
Be quick	10

By combining these within sentences, they could signal any one number or combination of numbers.

Mrs. Houdini easily learned the trick of going into a trance, the mediumistic rigmarole, the droning out of spirit messages. Houdini, of course, was a thoroughly impressive and masterful "professor." With a little practice they could do a séance as well as veterans.

The itinerant "mediums" had a sort of blue book for the mid-western small towns; it contained a list of persons in each place who frequented séances, with details about their deceased relatives and other points of assistance in the manufacture of "messages." On visiting a town the regular procedure was to cull personal information from the local graveyard. Boarding-house dining-rooms, where every one sat at the same table and there was much local gossip floating about, were another source of information. Still another open sesame was a musical Bible, in which a hidden music-box mechanism rendered "Nearer, my God,

to Thee" and other familiar hymns. Houdini would visit homes, ostensibly to take orders for copies of the musical Bible (to be paid for on delivery), and while the family was marveling over his sample, he would deftly extract the family secrets from the record in their own family Bible.

A local tipster would be engaged to give pointers on the identity of persons who came to the séances. The "messages" were adjusted to fit these people in the light of the knowledge he had gleaned of them, and the messages were distinctly what the public wanted.

This solemn hocus-pocus was not without its amusing features. One night, between the acts, the tipster pointed out to Houdini two negroes sitting in the gallery who were the local "bad men." These men went about armed with razors and were much feared. Three weeks before, one of their pals had been found murdered, and while no tangible evidence could be raised to fasten the crime on them, the people of the little town felt that they were implicated.

When Houdini began to give his "messages," he presently stepped forward with a puzzled, earnest face.

"I have a message here for Bill Doakes and Jim Saunders," he said. "It comes from Benny Carter. He says: 'Yo' boys bettah put yo' razors away, or yo' is sho' goin' ter be where Ah is now.' Are Bill Doakes and Jim Saunders present?"

There was an awed silence, and then, as some one in the gallery upset a chair and stumbled hastily toward the exit,

a quavering voice replied: "Yes, dey is, but dey ain't stayin'."

At the close of their engagement with the medicine show, the Houdinis set up in the medium business on their own for a brief period. Houdini took this step primarily to save his young wife from objectionable contacts in the poorer class of concert halls. It was a temporary expedient in the difficult business of making a living.

Mrs. Houdini recalls a number of incidents relating to this venture. She relates:

"I retain a vivid picture of Houdini beginning his elaborate hocus-pocus of putting me into a trance in some small hall, and the pale face of a grubby little woman in deep mourning in the circle of patient clients. I remember Houdini's admonitory whisper: 'Mrs. Mary Blank here. Her husband Henry passed away six months ago,' and the steady waving motion of his hands in the darkened room. But I was thinking at the time of a certain hat, a love of a hat which I had seen in a shop window that morning. I was badly in need of a hat, and I had asked Houdini for that one, but his reply was that we could not afford it. My eyes remained open, fixed on his, while he continued his whispered admonitions about persons in the audience. I continued to brood sulkily on the hat.

" 'Time to start, Bess,' whispered Houdini.

" 'Do I get that hat?' I demanded.

" 'No—can't afford it. Don't forget Mrs. Mary Blank—husband Henry.'

" 'No hat, no messages,' I replied.

"Houdini whispered to me urgently, meanwhile explaining aloud that the spirits were a bit difficult that day.

" 'Do I get the hat? Do I get the hat?' I kept repeating.

"Finally, sweating with anxiety and effort, he surrendered: 'Oh, all right! You get the hat.'

"My eyes closed slowly, and I twitched into my trance. Mary Blank got her message from Henry.

"I recall one evening, in a town over the Canadian border, Houdini had put me in a trance, and I was reading sealed messages from persons at the séance and answering them, according to our system. One of the questions read: 'Where is my brother John? I have not heard from him in nineteen years. (Signed) Mary Murphy.'

"For such questions the answer was invariably simple and evasive, something like, 'You will shortly hear from him, as he is on his way to you.' But I had a lively recollection of a Mrs. John Murphy who kept an ice-cream parlor near the Weiss home in New York. Houdini was a great pal of hers and often spoke of her. So to Houdini's astonishment my reply broke all the rules of the game: 'You will find your brother,' I said, 'at — East Seventy-second Street, New York.'

"This seemed a harmless answer to me, for by the time Mary Murphy wrote and got a reply, we would be safe in another town.

"But Mary Murphy fooled us. She wired. As Houdini often explained in his lectures on fraudulent mediums, there are an astonishing number of coincidences in life. John Murphy of East Seventy-second Street, New York,

was indeed Mary Murphy's long-lost brother, and if some bold realist had subsequently tried to explain to the good people of that Canadian town that Houdini and I really had no inside knowledge of the spirit world, no second sight, no occult knowledge whatever, he would have courted tar and feathers.

"The work brought in a surer income than the concert halls, and the surroundings were cleaner; but very soon Houdini found that he could not go on with it. He was too straightforward for that. The people were so pitiable, so trustful. Our messages probably gave them comfort, but it was a false comfort at best."

Houdini's observation of a rival "medium" at St. Joseph, Missouri, while he was still with the medicine show, first started him thinking seriously about the ethics of spirit messages. The man was so crude and his deluded clients were so pathetic in their credulity that Houdini began to be doubtful about the whole business. It was only gradually, however, that he came to realize what a low form of deceit is involved in giving simple people imaginary messages from the dead, and what very real mental havoc is sometimes wrought by such communications.

An odd coincidence, the second they encountered while playing as mediums, put the final touch on Houdini's disgust.

They were giving séances in a small town. Looking out of the window, before a séance, Houdini saw a woman dressed in black, scolding a small boy, obviously her son, who had been riding recklessly on his bicycle. With some

final admonitions, she turned toward Houdini's place and entered.

When the messages began to come, Houdini played a long chance with the woman. He told her that he had a spirit message that her little boy would break his arm while riding his bicycle. Shortly after the woman returned home, the child was brought in with his arm broken. Houdini was deeply shocked when the news was conveyed to him. He dropped the medium business then and there.

It was not a chapter he cared to look back on, but in a sense it served its purpose by giving him an inside glimpse of the workings of a pious fraud. In later years he made a sort of compensation when he took it on himself to expose the whole wretched business. He gained thereby the bitter, active enmity of a number of clever mediumistic tricksters and drew down on himself the wrath of many of their dupes; but he felt that the cause was worth it. His early moral revulsion from the mediumistic trickery contributed to the fervor of his later crusade.

After Dr. Hill's outfit gave up the ghost, early in 1898, and the Houdinis had made their first brief incursion into spiritualism, they joined a traveling repertoire show which specialized in blood-curdling melodramas. Between the acts the Houdinis did their magic and the trunk trick, and Houdini alone did the handcuff act. Ever jealous of his professional prestige as a magician, he appeared in the melodramas under an assumed name, and in order that the audiences should not recognize the actor as the

Great Houdini, he would play his part with a wad of paper stuffed in each cheek.

In the fine old repertoire standby, "Ten Nights in a Barroom," Houdini played Jim Morgan, the paternal bar-fly, and Mrs. Houdini his little daughter Mary who pleaded, "Father, dear father, come home with me now." A rivalry had arisen between Mrs. Houdini and the titular leading lady of the company which did not add to the harmony of life. Mrs. Houdini knew that she was a better actress than the leading lady. The leading lady knew that she outclassed Mrs. Houdini. Their respective husbands had a difficult time.

In the course of devising bits of stage business to steal the leading lady's thunder, Mrs. Houdini secretly decided to adapt a realistic trick to the barroom scene. According to the traditional action, little Mary pleads with her father to go home; in a drunken rage he flings a bottle at her, and she falls comfortably on a fat rug and dies.

Mrs. Houdini filled a small rubber balloon with red ink and hid it under her curls. When Houdini as her father hurled the bottle, she slapped her hand to her brow and broke the rubber, and the red ink spurted over her face. "My God, Bess!" groaned Houdini, springing forward with a cry of terror that was not in the lines, and in his excitement swallowing both wads of paper. His wife had to come to life and explain the trick to him before the show could go on.

At the beginning of April, 1898, he began his second

engagement with Welsh Brothers' Circus, a six months' tour through the smaller eastern cities. By this time he had begun to keep a diary, and the entries indicate that for a time he thought seriously of becoming an acrobat. Apparently his success as a clown on the bars led to this idea. "First appearance as clown on bars. Went big and funny," was his entry at Harrisburg, May 14. Later, various entries recorded his progress at practicing "somersets" and running a mile or more a day for his wind. Finally, on September 3, he "bought pink tights and uppers."

Thereafter, however, his ardor for acrobatics appeared to cool rapidly. The art of the tumbler was too simple to hold him, and he grew impatient for a return to engagements where he could do his own stuff exclusively. His dissatisfaction made him quarrelsome. Near the end of September, his diary reveals, he had a rough-and-tumble fight with "Bill the Dog Boy"—and worsted that freakish antagonist. On October 8 he wrote: "Welsh Brothers closed. Home Sweet Home. Last two weeks seemed like eternity."

This was the end of his American circus career. He was twenty-four and had served an apprenticeship of some six years of minor engagements. He was more determined than ever to break into big time.

VIII

THE thing that gave Houdini his first lift out of obscurity was a development of the despised handcuff trick, which most of his early audiences gazed on with such marked lack of enthusiasm.

There has been much learned discussion, and much nonsensical speculation, in every civilized language, as to how Houdini escaped from handcuffs and prison cells under most abnormal and rigorous conditions. Many persons have explained the mystery by the suggestion that Houdini could compress his knuckles so that they became smaller than his wrists and thus be easily slipped out of the gyves. Houdini could not do that, though it was not for lack of trying, and he maintained from his own experience that it was physically impossible to make one's hand of smaller compass than one's wrist.

From many ordinary handcuffs Houdini could release himself by giving them a blow in a certain spot. He stated publicly on several occasions that he frequently freed himself in this manner, but he never let any one witness his self-release, for that was his secret too. Generally speaking, he stated that the British regulation handcuffs were the easiest he encountered, and he was accustomed to free himself from these instantly with a single sharp rap.

For the more difficult handcuffs he would use his picklock, a refinement on the little instrument he devised while working for the locksmith in Appleton. He could,

incidentally, improvise a workable picklock from a bit of wire or a pin or a watch spring. Certain handcuffs he could unlock with the aid of a piece of twine alone. The real key was his profound knowledge of every type of lock and of locking system. How he managed to operate with his hands trussed behind him is another matter. There were certain gyves from which he freed himself by sheer dexterity and strength, and on at least one occasion he got out of a cuff in which a slug had been placed in such a position that it could not be unlocked. His exact process of working would be, as he sometimes remarked, a dangerous thing to let loose in any society, even though few persons would have the special skill and knowledge to make use of it.

Of course, the most carefully preserved secrets will leak a little, and after Houdini became famous there grew up a veritable army of "handcuff kings," ranging from the veriest frauds to highly skilled performers. However, he was the originator of the handcuff challenge escape act, as of various other escapes, and none of his imitators dared submit himself to the rigorous conditions often accepted by Houdini as part of the day's work. No other would accept promiscuously the challenge of any ambitious police chief eager to test his jail against the skill of the "handcuff king." Stripped naked, submitted to the sharpest clinical examination by police surgeons who explored all the orifices of his body with fingers and instruments and surgical lights, left locked in a cell handcuffed hand and foot, and securely chained to the wall or the bars, his clothes locked behind him, Houdini would walk jauntily

out of the stoutest jail door in a few minutes' time, fully clothed and looking as if the whole affair had cost him no particular exertion. No other "handcuff king" could emulate him in such tests.

The little picklock remained with him through most of the tests. The surgeons and detectives, hard-boiled and intent and up to tricks, and not at all delicate in their attentions, would pass their hands over every inch of his body, and probe and explore, but never during all the years of his escapes did any of them find anything on him.

"Sure, I had something on me, a little bit of a thing," he once explained to a friend. "The hiding-place was so easy to see that they always overlooked it."

It was late in 1895, when the American Gaiety Girl Company was slowly dying on his hands, that Houdini conceived the idea of visiting police stations and offering to free himself from any handcuffs in order to attract attention to the show. The first place where this feat drew some newspaper space was Holyoke, Massachusetts. The *Holyoke Daily Democrat* of December 2, 1895, contained the following news story:

HAS NO USE FOR HANDCUFFS

The Police Entertained by a Stranger Who Unfastens Any Pair of Handcuffs Put on Him

Harry Houdini of the American Gaiety Girl Company, which plays at the Empire this week, walked into the police station yesterday afternoon to see if the police had any handcuffs which they couldn't manage. Mr. Houdini is an expert in unlocking

these instruments and he can manage them as well when they are around his wrists as when fastened to some one else.

"I am traveling with the Gaiety Company," said he to Officer Chamberlain who was seated in the office. "I thought I would drop in and show you a little trick with the handcuffs. Put any sort of a cuff around my wrists, lock it and take away the key; let me go into a side room for a second and I will return with the leaders unfastened."

"A rather doubtful statement," thought Officer Chamberlain, but nevertheless he thought he would give the fellow a trial, so he pulled out his own manacles and fastened them around Mr. Houdini's wrists, putting the key in his pocket. Then the fellow walked into an adjoining room and shut the door. In less than a minute he returned carrying the handcuffs in his hand. This astonishing performance was repeated twice with equal success each time.

It makes no difference with Mr. Houdini what kind of handcuffs are produced. He unlocks them all with as much ease as if they were strings wound around his wrists.

This was a handsome notice, and thereafter others began to crop up in the towns the Houdinis visited, but unfortunately they were all provincial towns, and the men who ran the big booking offices did not read the *Holyoke Daily Democrat* and similar papers. In the larger cities the police chiefs were busier and more hard-boiled, and callous city editors showed no interest in the efforts of a small-time vaudeville performer eager for a bit of free space in the news columns.

It was not until the end of 1898, when he was playing a series of obscure engagements in Chicago and its en-

Photo by Dietz, N. Y. © *Houdini.*

Above: HOUDINI EXECUTING DR. LYNN'S "PALIGENESIA" ILLUSION, 1924. *Below:* THE NEEDLE TRICK.

virons, that Houdini hit on a scheme for making his police-station stunt more dramatic.

He went about his plans carefully. First he made friends with several newspaper men. Then he secured an introduction to Andy Rohan, lieutenant of detectives and right-hand man of the chief of police. Andy, with his great paunch and drooping red walrus mustache, was a familiar figure in Chicago in those days as he drove about from one resort to another, overflowing the seat of his one-horse rig, a little black bag between his feet. Houdini took his wife to the city jail to pay a visit to Rohan, and it was her job to keep the rotund and good-natured officer amused while Houdini prowled about and surreptitiously studied the lock system.

The visit was without result. The locks were complicated, and Houdini could not discover what he wanted; so on the following day, somewhat to the astonishment of Rohan, the Houdinis called again. After a time Rohan began to get suspicious. He was tired of Mrs. Houdini's stories and obviously bored with carrying on a mild flirtation with the wife of a mysterious stranger with a passion for snooping about the jail. Finally he informed the pair that the jail was for those who had business there, either behind the bars or otherwise, and he had no further hospitality to offer. By this time, however, Houdini had signaled that he had what he was after; so they left abruptly.

The next day Houdini told his reporter friends that he could escape from the city jail after letting himself be

handcuffed and locked in a cell. Nobody had done anything like that in Chicago before; so that was news. Houdini therefore paid another visit to the jail, this time accompanied by several reporters and a photographer. Rohan was not unaware of the value of reporters, and the stunt pleased him. He assumed that Houdini could not get out, and he was not averse to having that young nuisance make a fool of himself.

Houdini was duly locked up, and in a few minutes he walked into the warden's office, a free man. His reception, however, was disappointing. The reporters had learned in the interval of his previous visits to the jail, and assumed that he had taken a wax impress of the locks, had keys made, and merely took them out of his pocket and unlocked the cell door and the corridor exits. There was no magic in that, said the skeptical young men, and it wasn't news.

"Suppose you strip me and search me before you lock me up?" said Houdini.

That sounded more like the real thing, they admitted, and so that was done, and in addition, at Houdini's suggestion, they sealed his mouth with plaster. His clothes were locked in another cell. So they left him, manacled and stark naked, and within ten minutes he strolled jauntily into Rohan's office with his clothes on. Moreover, he entered the chief's office from the street door. First he had let himself out of the jail and dashed over to his wife at their lodgings to cry, "Success! Success!" By that time quite a crowd had assembled in the chief's

quarters, and all of them, especially Andy Rohan, were impressed and astounded.

The real thrill, however, came next morning. Houdini burst into the room (he always burst in, he could never come in quietly), waving a sheaf of newspapers and shouting, "Bess! Bess! I'm famous! Look at my picture in the papers!"

His picture was there, sure enough. It was only a narrow single-column cut, and the stories were only a couple of inches long, but they seemed very large and important to him, as indeed they were.

Then and there all his small fortune was spent for papers and stamps. All day the Houdinis were busy marking, folding, and stamping the clippings. Houdini sent one to every person he had ever known—or heard of.

This was the real beginning of Houdini's public jail-breaking. Thereafter he escaped from the principal jails in many cities. His collection of certificates from the police and municipal authorities covers most of the larger cities from San Francisco to Moscow.

Occasionally a conservative warden or police chief would refuse to allow Houdini to test the integrity of his jail. As Houdini became better known, however, the newspapers, as a matter of local pride as well as news value, usually forced the recalcitrant wardens to permit the test. "Perhaps our jail will hold him," was the usual argument, but nothing held Houdini.

His experiences included all the most modern American jails, fortress-like places of incarceration devised by of-

ficers of the Kaiser's government, the famous Siberian prison van, which was the pride of the Tsar's secret police, and from which no prisoner had ever been lost, medieval dungeons in which he would be clamped securely to eight-foot walls of solid masonry, and the black holds of ancient prison ships in which he would be corseleted in leather and steel and chained to huge oaken beams. Houdini broke free from all these restraints. In all his demonstrations there was not a single failure.

Sometimes the task was tough even for him. On a number of occasions he emerged with his limbs swollen or bleeding, concealing his exhaustion as best he could. Once through an amusing mischance he came very close to failure.

This occurred in the days after he had become famous. It was during one of his continental tours, at a town in Scotland. At the jail there, after he had been stripped, searched, manacled, and had had his mouth sealed, a shrewd-looking old turnkey shut him in a cell. As the turnkey walked away down the corridor, Houdini reflected that he did not like the twinkle in that old man's eye. The expression had not been exactly malevolent, but it was provocative and derisory.

Houdini, however, quickly freed himself from his shackles and tackled the cell lock. It would not open. He labored and sweated over it in a growing impatience, but the lock would not budge. Finally, pausing to rest, he reflected that unless he got out of that place he would on the morrow be the laughing-stock of two continents, and

all his laboriously built-up reputation as the greatest jail-breaker of all time would be completely in ruins. With redoubled energy he began working again on that stubborn lock, but it resisted every effort.

Finally, completely exhausted, he leaned against the door—and it swung open so unexpectedly that he nearly fell headlong into the corridor. The turnkey had not locked it!

After Houdini had let himself out of the corridor, he came upon the aged jailer, who was sitting on a stool smoking a black pipe. The man squinted up at him, inscrutable and quizzical.

"So you got oot, laddie," he remarked in a noncommittal voice.

At Memphis, Tennessee, in 1899, Houdini, having freed himself from a cell and from the jail building, walked across the jail yard and started to let himself out of the gate. Suddenly came a sharp summons to hold up his hands. Houdini turned to see a scowling guard with a cocked rifle against his shoulder. "Put 'em up!" said the guard, with unmistakable curtness, and Houdini hastily put 'em up.

The man was the rock-pile guard, and the warden had neglected to inform him that Houdini was in the jail that day and had the privilege of escaping, if he could. The incident was soon ended, but it had sinister possibilities that made Houdini careful to be assured in future that all prison guards had warning that he was breaking jail.

One of Houdini's most difficult escapes was made in one

of the larger California cities, during his first trip to the Coast, not long after he surprised Andy Rohan. On this occasion, after stripping Houdini, the chief of police had him locked in a cell with four pairs of handcuffs on his arms, shackles on his legs, and one leg encased in an Oregon boot, a fifty-five-pound leg-iron that has no key and works by a combination lock. After Houdini had escaped from these complicated shackles, the chief of police, who had submitted to the test with reluctance, issued the following formal and not very complimentary public statement: "Should Houdini turn out to be a criminal, I would consider him a very dangerous man, and I suggest that the various officers throughout the United States remember his appearance in case of future emergency."

Once and once only Houdini failed to get out of a handcuff. It was shortly before the Andy Rohan incident, while he was filling an engagement at Middleton's museum in Chicago. A detective locked him in a pair of cuffs that completely baffled him. He worked over those shackles vainly for more than an hour, until the audience began to jeer at him. Finally he managed to open one lock, but the other resisted all his efforts, and the derisive crowd left to watch the next freak.

Poor Houdini stood disconsolately on his platform, and his wife wept bitterly.

"Do you give up, Houdini?" asked the detective. He was a hard-looking customer.

"No," replied Houdini, resolutely.

"Well," said the detective, "I might as well tell you that cuff don't open. I fixed a slug in it, and it won't unlock."

The audience had departed and Houdini could not explain the reason for his failure. He thought he was ruined for life.

Broken in spirit, the Houdinis went to their lodgings.

"Well, Bess, I'm done for," said Houdini. "The whole world will know that I failed to get out of a cuff. We may as well quit. I'll take that job William Bartholmes offered to get me at the Yale lock factory."

Mr. Bartholmes, Mrs. Houdini's brother-in-law, had indeed suggested that he could land a good steady position for Houdini, if the Houdinis ever thought of giving up their vagabond life—but somehow Beatrice could not see Houdini settling down in a lock factory.

Anti-climax came the next day. They went back to their platform expecting every one to laugh at the Great Handcuff King. Not a soul laughed. Later Houdini asked Mr. Hedges, the manager, if there had been any comment on the failure of the previous day.

Mr. Hedges laughed indifferently. "Didn't you get out of that cuff?" he said. "This is the first I knew about it. If it was fixed, what's the difference?"

That really hurt, to think that no one had taken any notice of their great tragedy.

After that Houdini was more wary. He first locked and unlocked every cuff brought to him.

IX

THE publicity from Houdini's jail-breaking stunt in Chicago brought quick results. In a few days a representative of the Hopkins Theater called on him and asked him to step in immediately to play a *rôle* in their bill, the headline act having closed unexpectedly on account of death. The Houdinis had never, save for the single engagement at Tony Pastor's, played a first-class house of this character, though during their visits to Chicago they had occasionally dropped in at the Hopkins Theater to keep warm.

Unfortunately Mrs. Houdini was confined to her bed with influenza. Houdini had done no act without her for nearly five years, and he felt that he could not do himself justice without her aid. He was almost heartbroken over the realization that his longed-for opportunity had come and he was unable to avail himself of it. As an excuse, he began to make what seemed to him impossible conditions.

"I would not play Hopkins unless I were starred," he said.

"We want you for the star act," was the reply.

Houdini asked the salary and was told eighty-five dollars.

"I would not work for less than one hundred dollars," he said haughtily.

The Hopkins man went to the telephone for instructions and returned with Houdini's price accepted. Hou-

dini, in a desperate state of mind, began making a number of temperamental demands, star place on the bill, star dressing-room, large mirror in the room. The agent eagerly agreed to everything.

Finally Houdini excused himself and went to consult his wife. When she heard about what seemed a fabulous offer and opportunity, she sat up gamely and said: "Get me to the theater. I'll work."

The Hopkins man had a cab waiting outside, and they drove to the theater in state. Beatrice Houdini had never ridden in a cab before, and in the excitement of the ride, the large theater, and in particular the well-appointed dressing-room with its full-length mirror, her illness was almost forgotten. The act went well, better than it usually did before minor audiences.

After his short session at Hopkins, Houdini went back to the dime museums once more, but the Chicago publicity still served him. One night, while he was playing a museum in Minneapolis, a stranger came to him after the show.

"Will you and your wife come out with me and have a cup of coffee?" he said. "I want to talk with you."

When they were seated in a restaurant, Houdini asked the man what he thought of the act.

"I think you're a rotten showman," replied the stranger. "Why don't you cut out the little magical stuff—it only distracts the audience—and just give a couple of big thrillers, like the handcuffs and the trunk trick?" The Houdinis were silent. "There are plenty of good magi-

cians doing the stock stuff, and doing it very well, at forty per," the stranger continued. "You have two big stunts at which nobody else can touch you. Those are the things to cash in on. I'll try you out on the circuit at sixty dollars, and if you make it go, I'll raise you. My name is Martin Beck."

Houdini turned suddenly to beam at his wife across the table. Martin Beck! The Orpheum Circuit! Big time! That seemed too good to be true.

Meanwhile Mr. Beck sat back with an enigmatic smile. He was conscious that in Houdini he had made a find, but in his mind there was a large reservation. Houdini seemed to him one of the shyest men he had met—in a profession where that quality was not common. There was just a bit of doubt whether such a shy person could put his stuff over.

Martin Beck's curt advice put an end to most of the miscellaneous tricks with which Houdini had cluttered his act. The Houdinis had a tender feeling for this minor magic and were reluctant to abandon it. Thereafter Houdini no longer produced an incredible number of objects, including live pigeons and guinea pigs, from a borrowed silk hat. The guinea pigs were given away; the pigeons, two regal white birds known as Lord and Lady Snowball, were stored with a Chicago friend who generously agreed to house them—and subsequently had them cooked for dinner. Even the watch trick, in which the Houdinis took great pride, was discarded.

In this trick Houdini would borrow a watch, and

stumbling on the runway, would apparently fall and break it. The broken watch was of course a substitute. The borrowed watch would be passed quietly to Mrs. Houdini, who would place it on the back of a target off stage. Meanwhile Houdini, profusely apologetic, would ram the fragments of the broken watch into a pistol. He would then demand a target and insist that Mrs. Houdini place it on her head. When he aimed and fired the pistol, a spring released the real watch, which was thereupon returned to the owner intact. The first time Houdini ventured this bit of magic in public, the releasing spring did not work properly and the borrowed watch fell to the floor and was actually smashed, much to the dismay of the performers. Houdini, however, picked it up, brazenly declared that it was intact, and requested the owner to call for it later in his dressing-room, where explanations were made and damages paid. Despite this initial mishap, the watch trick was their favorite for over a year. However, when Martin Beck advised Houdini to cut the lesser stunts and confine himself to a few big thrillers, he saw the point instantly.

Their first trip on the big circuit involved a jump from Chicago to the Pacific Coast. They were booked to travel tourist. Houdini, as usual, accepted every one's advice about the trip, and as they had little money, they decided to take enough food with them to last through the entire journey. Houdini spent all his money except seven dollars on the supplies. A succession of delivery boys dumped extravagant quantities of chickens, fruit, and vegetables

into their room, and for two days Mrs. Houdini was busy roasting and baking. When they went to the train they dragged with them a huge hamper of food, so that they resembled a pair of immigrants. It was summer, and the weather was hot.

They had a single lower berth. Two other travelers squeezed into the berth above them. The Houdinis were proud of their forethought about supplies and unpacked their chicken and biscuits and jams for the first meal with some ostentation. George, the porter, agreed to furnish plain black coffee—the Houdini commissariat included condensed milk—for five cents a cup. Their first meal was a banquet. Houdini insisted on offering fruit or jam to other passengers who had not brought such dainties. The Houdinis saws the trip stretching as a jolly picnic all the way to California. After the first breakfast, however, they shared a single cup of coffee at each meal, as it was necessary to keep the seven dollars virtually intact for the first week's expenses in San Francisco.

On the third morning, however, came a tragedy. It was a hot, sultry day, and after the Houdinis awoke they noticed an unpleasant odor in the car. When they opened their food hampers, the source of this was revealed. The food was spoiling. In silence they dropped the remains of their chickens, tomatoes, and other edibles out of the window. They had no appetite for the breakfast of hard biscuits and jam.

The porter, who was unaware that they had only seven dollars, proved most sympathetic. Houdini could buy

meat at the stations, and the porter could cook it for them on his oil stove. At subsequent stops Houdini did go shopping with George and bought fresh bread and such a tiny piece of meat that even the tolerant George looked his disapproval. So they came to Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the seven dollars had diminished to five. It was a blistering day, and the two travelers were dirty and tired, and their tempers were on edge. The train was to stop for an hour. Houdini asked his wife to take a walk with him, but she was too exhausted to venture out into the heat.

"Bess," he said, "if it is possible to get ice cream, I'm going to bring you some."

Houdini vanished until after the starting whistle had sounded. Then, as the train was beginning to wheeze, he burst into view far down the street, running like mad and lugging a huge can. He was hauled aboard the train, breathless, but he soon recovered.

"Come, folks, ice cream for all," he cried. "George, you're also in on this party, and here's a small present for your kindness."

To Mrs. Houdini's dismay, he counted five shiny silver dollars into the porter's hand.

"Where did you get that money?" she demanded. "Did you kill somebody?"

"No, sweetheart," he replied. "Let's eat the cream first."

George searched through the train and produced an assortment of dishes for the passengers of the Houdini

car. There was enough ice cream for all. George ate his share out of his old iron frying-pan. All the passengers, including Houdini, feasted—that is, all except one. Mrs. Houdini was too uneasy to enjoy the treat. Her husband's pockets, she observed, were bulging with silver dollars. With a growing anxiety she watched his attack on the ice cream.

Finally he explained. He had got into a crap game. Three dollars he had put away in an inner pocket. With the other two he decided to try his luck. Luck had proved invincible. Minutely he described the game. Mrs. Houdini could hardly understand a word of the jargon, but George followed the tale ecstatically. Five dollars had been spent for ice cream, five more for George's tip, and there still remained seventy-five free and clear. This, Mrs. Houdini promptly annexed. She was taking no chances with the sporting glow in George's eyes.

The rest of the trip was a festival. No further need for sharing a single cup of coffee for breakfast. George would appear at meal time with a majestic bow. "Mr. Houdini, what you all gwine ter hab to eat?" His larder blossomed magically with bacon, eggs, chops, and steaks.

When they arrived at San Francisco, June 2, 1899, they were still bloated millionaires. Houdini insisted on taking a room at six dollars a week. Hitherto they had never gone beyond five. The room boasted running water and a gas stove. As soon as they arrived, tired and grimy, Mrs. Houdini washed Houdini's ears. He was one of the little

boys who never learned the art of keeping his ears clean. To Mrs. Houdini, brought up in a household where the virtue of scouring ears was rigorously observed, the state of her husband's ears was a matter of constant concern. For thirty-three years she attacked his ears at frequent intervals with soap and water. He submitted to these ablutionary onslaughts with patient stoicism, but he could never be moved to do the job himself. Shortly before Houdini's last illness, Mrs. Houdini, who had herself been confined to her bed with ptomaine poisoning, woke up in the middle of the night with a painful realization that Houdini's ears, neglected for several days, must be in a very parlous state indeed. She jumped up and darted for the soap and water and wash-cloth. "You are now fifty-two years old," she exclaimed, as she gave the guilty orifices a thorough scrubbing, "and yet I can't trust you to wash your own ears!"

To return to San Francisco in the summer of 1899, the six-dollar room was not wholly a success for the tired travelers. It was infested with fleas. Houdini immediately fell asleep, for no stinging or biting insects ever troubled him, but Mrs. Houdini lay awake and scratching into the small hours. Then suddenly the house reared up and shook itself, and both Houdinis were rolled not ungently out of bed.

Mrs. Houdini staggered to the window and saw some houses apparently tumbling down. Then she dashed back to Houdini, but he was placidly sleeping, though still on

the floor, and he refused to be roused. He was not a long-distance sleeper, as has been hitherto explained in these pages, but while he was at it he slept intensively.

The phenomenon was a coast earthquake, a minor one, as such things go, and not enough to disturb the native realtors.

The next day Houdini challenged the local police to fasten him in such a way that he could not escape. The detective bureau welcomed the rash young man. After he had been stripped and searched, ten pairs of handcuffs were fastened on him. His ankles were shackled together, also his arms, and then the arm-bands were handcuffed to the fetters. Weighted down with steel, Houdini was allowed to hobble into a room which he had not previously been permitted to enter.

After the door had been closed on him, a cynical sergeant of detectives explained to the reporters that it was beyond human possibility for the man to get free. "We'll let him cool in there for an hour and then we'll unlock him," he said comfortably, and at that moment Houdini stepped out of the room carrying all the shackles in his free hand.

The police then procured from the county insane asylum a leather belt-jacket, used to restrain particularly violent cases, and regarded as escape-proof. Houdini's body was locked in this, and his hands were locked in leather cuffs, which were part of the apparatus. He was placed in an isolated chamber, the approaches of which were guarded so that no confederates could assist him.

Within five minutes he stepped into the corridor carrying the belt-jacket in his hand.

Naturally the press could not ignore such demonstrations. Houdini became a topic of discussion throughout California and a great drawing-card wherever he played. After he had been appearing for a short time a man calling himself Professor Benzon was moved to write to a newspaper what purported to be an exposure of Houdini's handcuff act. Houdini, he said, had a key concealed in his mouth, and the professor was sure he could duplicate everything Houdini could do with handcuffs. Houdini's reply was prompt. He would let Professor Benzon strip him, seal his mouth, and lock him in a cuff. If he could not escape he would forfeit one hundred dollars. He would then lock Professor Benzon in a cuff and give him the key. If the professor could not escape, he need not give Houdini the hundred dollars, but he must permit Houdini to shave off the professor's long black beard on the stage of the Orpheum Theater. The professor failed to show up for the contest, but Houdini's popularity did not suffer thereby.

The Houdinis were receiving ninety dollars a week on the Orpheum Circuit. One of the actors on the bill kept telling Houdini that he was worth at least two hundred dollars. That seemed a perfectly impossible sum to the two recent graduates from the beer halls and the dime museums, but they frequently talked it over. Finally they decided to ask Martin Beck for a raise to one hundred and fifty dollars. They did not expect to get the raise, but

there seemed no harm in asking. To their complete astonishment, Mr. Beck consented immediately. At the end of their first week on the new scale, Houdini went out and bought his wife her first fur neckpiece. It cost thirty-five dollars, but it gave them infinite satisfaction. It became for them the symbol of a new stage in Houdini's career.

That career was attracting increasing public attention as the tour proceeded. In addition to getting free from the police shackles in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Houdini bested the police handcuffers in Memphis, Nashville, Kansas City, Providence, and several smaller cities where they consented to test his skill in the jails. He had at last learned showmanship. He could command space in the newspapers and the keen attention of his audiences. At twenty-five, he was giving his performance with all the assurance and finesse of a veteran. Yet he was still unable to secure any attention in the greater eastern cities where the reputations of performers were in large measure established for the whole community. The tour of the Orpheum Circuit, begun in the early summer of 1899, ended in the fall, and another period of uncertain and scattered engagements began. Houdini fumed and fretted. He had saved no money, for each week he sent a substantial portion of his earnings to his mother, and the rest, above his frugal living-expenses, generally slipped through his fingers for old books and curios bearing on some phase of his art. His success was not increasing proportionately to his skill.

To the study of his profession he had devoted himself

for half a dozen years with complete single-mindedness. For every phase of magic his curiosity was insatiable. In January, 1899, he was on the bill at Middleton's Clark Street Museum in Chicago with "the tiniest triplets ever born," with a mammoth Fat Lady, skirt dancers, legless dancers, English ballad singers, Irish comedians, and "Thardo, the rattlesnake poison-defier." Houdini paid no attention to any of these except Thardo, but he never missed one of her performances. Thardo's stand was about twelve feet from Houdini's in the Hall of Freaks, and the ring of spectators about her contained no person more fascinated than Houdini.

When Houdini saw a trick, he was never content until he knew how it was done. Sword-swallowers, frog-swallowers, fire-eaters, poison-eaters, strong men, spiritist mediums, sleight-of-hand artists—Houdini would stand before them for long periods, completely absorbed. Whenever he was missing, if there was a miracle worker or juggler in town, his wife knew where to find him. He had to know all the details of their work—who had invented the tricks, how they trained themselves, what the after effects were.

During his first tour with Welsh Brothers' Circus, Houdini devoted much time to an old Japanese who could swallow whole oranges and similar large objects and bring them up again. He advised Houdini to start with very small potatoes, gradually increasing the size, in order to accustom his muscles to this pleasant pastime. Mrs. Houdini strenuously disapproved of such magical pranks,

but the professional swallowers, especially those who went in for live frogs, always lured Houdini. He was finally cured of the desire to emulate such feats in the course of a European trip. A famous frog-swallower was on the bill with him at Circus Busch in Berlin. Watching the man's performance with his usual intentness one evening, Houdini saw him swallow a whole flock of frogs. Later, when the performer counted his flock over in his dressing-room, one was missing. Houdini speculated uncomfortably on the whereabouts of that batrachian. The various Boscos who swallow live snakes merely disgusted Houdini. He would spend hours with them discussing their wriggly art, but he had no inclination to take it up.

As for the Strong Men he encountered, his wife could not drag him away from them. His first great fascination in this line was Charles Jefferson, who could lift up a blacksmith's anvil by the horn and place it on a table. Houdini followed him about with the reverent admiration of a small boy for his first cowboy. Another strong-man hero of Houdini's museum days was William Le Roy, known as The Nail King and The Human Claw-Hammer. Le Roy could take a nail in his teeth and push it through a one-inch plank. He could also draw out with his teeth a nail that had been driven through a two-inch plank. Houdini would watch his act with the utmost intentness over and over again, trying to detect some fraud.

He learned showmanship from Le Roy. He learned it from every one, and he remained a student and learner to the end. One of his most valued early mentors was not

a Strong Man but the husband of the Strong Woman, Mattie Lee Price, whom he ran across while playing museums in the Middle West. Mattie Price had almost inhuman strength, but her act was sold by the amazing showmanship of her husband. Houdini never wearied of watching this man, of talking endlessly with him. The man's rare ability was finally demonstrated. Mattie ran off with a circus grifter, and thereafter, without her husband to put it across, her act was a complete failure.

Whenever he heard of an old showman or acrobat or magician in any town he came to, Houdini invariably got in touch with him and would sit up with the man far into the night getting all he had to tell. In default of such a contact he would turn to books. Accounts of chemical and physical experiments, forgotten illusions, the newest inventions of the day; the commonest articles about him —all were grist for his mill. He was a magician not only during show hours, but for nineteen hours of every day. His art would intrude on the tenderest moments. Every year on his wedding anniversary, if he were within striking distance of Coney Island, he would make a sentimental pilgrimage with his wife to the scene of their marriage. On the way home, sitting close to his wife, his arm about her, in that mixture of play and sentiment that pleased him, suddenly, on top of a kiss, he would exclaim: "Bess, I've an idea how I can make that box trick better!" The next instant he would fish a stub of pencil from his pocket, and would be frantically scrawling notes on scraps of paper and sketching crude diagrams.

Through his day-to-day contacts, spurred on by artistic curiosity, Houdini learned all the technique of utilizing suspense, rousing curiosity, emphasizing danger. His Chinese water torture cell escape, which he featured in his latter years, was a dangerous feat, and on two or three occasions Houdini narrowly escaped an ugly accident when he was practicing it as a preliminary to production, but its danger was impressed on audiences by a typical piece of Houdini showmanship. He had his formidable rescuer, always near by in case of emergencies, stalk out from the wings and stand with a shining ax in full light on the stage.

When, toward the close of 1899, Houdini's efforts to start in the big show palaces of the larger eastern cities proved futile, he finally decided on an heroic roundabout method of attacking this problem. He would save enough money to go abroad and would conquer America by way of Europe, as many a good American performer had done. His logic was sound enough. In those more naïve pre-war days this country was far less self-sufficient than it is now, and reputations that had the stamp of approval of London, Paris, or Berlin had an exalted value in New York. In the late spring of 1900, Houdini, with his wife, booked second-class passage on a small liner and sailed, without a shadow of an engagement awaiting him, to attempt to take Europe by storm.

X

THE second-class cabin secured by the Houdinis was stuffy and hot, and it was shaken by every beat of the ship's engines. Before the vessel was out of New York harbor, Houdini's eyes were rolling, and his complexion turned green. By the time the first ocean swells reached the ship he tottered to the cabin and flung himself on the berth, and he did not emerge until the ship was docked at Southampton.

By the third day he was delirious. The ship's doctor visited him occasionally, but Mrs. Houdini had to spend virtually the whole voyage in the stuffy cabin forcing the Handcuff King to take small quantities of ice and lemon-juice. She dared leave him only for meals, and then she had to take her sheets and tie him firmly to the bed, carefully knotting the sheets beneath, where he could not reach to untie them. At one time Mrs. Houdini kept a life-preserver strapped about him for fear he would jump overboard in his delirium.

Finally they arrived in London and put up at an actors' boarding-house. Then began a tedious search for a booking. The agencies were cold to the claims of the Handcuff King, for their offices were besieged by unknown mediocrities who were confident of their ability to startle the world. Houdini's certificates from police chiefs of remote American cities did not impress the agents.

Besides, London at that time was in a state of skepticism

about performers who claimed superior powers. Two such marvels had recently fallen from grace after brief careers of public applause and subsequent exposure. One was the Bullet-Proof Man—whose virtue, it turned out, consisted in a concealed bullet-proof garment lined with ground glass. (Houdini later bought the garment and treasured it.) The other person was The Georgia Magnet, a slender young woman who defied the efforts of five men to lift her on the stage of the Alhambra. After a clever reporter discovered her secret and exposed the fact that she utilized natural laws and not "magnetic power" to resist levitation, the audiences turned against her.

With these disillusionments fresh in London's mind, it was not remarkable that Houdini wore out much shoe leather without finding a booking. As soon as he stated that he had "extraordinary powers" to escape from handcuffs, the agents wished him a polite good-day.

After some days of fruitless interviews, Houdini happened to call at the office of an agent who was away. In his place was a very young man named Harry Day, who, perhaps because of his inexperience, became interested in Houdini and arranged to have him meet C. Dundas Slater, manager of the Alhambra. It was a lucky day for Houdini, and also for Day, who subsequently became Houdini's manager and with this start became such a figure that he finally entered Parliament.

Slater allowed Houdini to give some trial performances, but he was not wholly convinced of his ability.

"If you can escape from handcuffs at Scotland Yard, I'll sign you," he said.

"Can you go with me now?" was Houdini's reply.

At London's famous police headquarters, Superintendent Melville ridiculed the idea that any one could escape from Scotland Yard handcuffs. Stage handcuffs were one thing, he told Mr. Slater, but Scotland Yard handcuffs were the last word in scientific manacles. Houdini, however, insisted on trying them, so suddenly Melville produced a pair of cuffs.

"Well, here's how we fasten the Yankee criminals who come over here and get into trouble," he remarked.

With that he encircled Houdini's arms around a pillar, snapped on a pair of "darbies" and stepped back with a laugh.

"I'm going to leave you here and come back for you in a couple of hours," he said. He started toward the door with Slater.

"Wait!" cried Houdini. "I'll go with you. Here's the way the Yankees open the handcuffs."

He tossed the cuffs to the floor and stepped away from the pillar.

Superintendent Melville was shocked and visibly nonplused, but in a minute he held out his hand: "Scotland Yard won't forget you, young man," he said.

There was no longer any question with Slater about an engagement. He drove Houdini back to the office and signed him for two weeks.

Houdini's opening night was eventful. As soon as his act began, a stranger calling himself "The Great Cirnoc" leaped on the stage, proclaiming himself the original Handcuff King, and denounced Houdini as a fraud. For once Houdini seemed to lose his nerve. He permitted the intruder to hold the center of the stage, thundering against Houdini as an impostor. The man even declared that Houdini was not an American and had never been in the United States.

At that point a man in the audience stood up.

"That is not true," he said. "I know that young man is an American. I also am an American and I saw him several years ago doing his handcuff act."

The speaker was Chauncey M. Depew. He resumed his seat amid applause, and this distinguished reënforcement completely restored Houdini's equilibrium. "Get me the Bean Giant," he whispered to his wife, who was on the stage dressed as a page. "We'll fix this fellow now."

The Bean Giant was a monster handcuff invented by a Captain Bean of Boston. The cuff was made in such a way that it seemed a sheer impossibility for any one once fastened with it to apply a key or any other device to unlock it. Captain Bean had offered five hundred dollars to any one who could release himself from the cuff. For a long time the cuff remained invincible until Houdini blew into Boston and solved its secret in a few minutes. He forfeited the five hundred dollars, however, by refusing to explain his method.

Now Houdini advanced upon Cirnoc, and holding out

the Bean Giant, offered the alleged Handcuff King five hundred dollars if he could solve the secret of the cuffs and free himself. Cirnoc frowned on the formidable manacles.

"Let me see you get out of them," he said.

"Lock me in," challenged Houdini.

Cirnoc did so, whereupon Houdini retired to his little cabinet and in a twinkling emerged with his hands free.

It was then Cirnoc's turn. Houdini locked him in the cuffs and even gave him the key, but the man was unable to rid himself of the bonds. The audience gave Houdini an ovation, and Cirnoc, discomfited, had to ask Houdini to release him. However, with a show of sportsmanship, he shook Houdini's hand before he left the stage. It is probable that many a skeptic in the audience assumed that the whole affair, including the interposition of Mr. Depew, was a clever Yankee frame-up. Houdini, however, had never heard of Cirnoc before. He was to hear more of him later on.

With this dramatic beginning, Houdini proceeded to make a smashing hit. His engagement, begun early in July, was extended to the last week in August, and was terminated only because he had accepted several bookings in Germany. Each succeeding performance was of increased interest, for Houdini was a challenge to professional restrainers of all kinds, as well as to the amateur detectives of the press. Many persons brought irons and manacles to the theater—in all, a rich and varied assortment—to test the prowess of the young Handcuff King.

At first Houdini released himself within a small tent, but this evoked some criticism. Doubting Thomases among the onlookers suspected that the tent concealed secret help of some kind. So one night Houdini dramatically ordered the tent removed. He had police challengers place manacles and fetters on him and fasten them together behind his back with another handcuff so that he was forced to a kneeling position. His only stipulation was that he be allowed to keep his hands out of sight of the spectators. Then, on his knees, facing the big, silent house from the open stage, he freed himself in five minutes. Before Houdini left, he was reëngaged for the holiday season, beginning in mid-December.

His first continental opening was at the Central Theater, Dresden, where he was to appear for the month of September, 1900. The Herr Direktor, Gustav Kammsetzer, was a cautious man, and he was suspicious of reputations made in England. Before Houdini went on, the Director explained to him in broken English that the German audiences expressed their disapproval by whistling.

"If de public vistles, you don't finish de act," was his parting admonition. "Now you vork; I vatch."

Houdini started with the handcuffs, and after his first escape the entire audience rose cheering. The morose Herr Direktor became so excited that he ran out to the center of the stage and led the applause.

Houdini had perfected a new stunt, the first public exhibition of which he wished to give at Dresden. Accord-

ingly he applied to the police for permission to be thrown overboard handcuffed and free himself under water. This request the police emphatically refused. Such antics were *verboten* in a well-ordered German city. However, an officer of the secret police advised Houdini to make the attempt despite the prohibition. If he got in the water before the police arrived, according to this adviser, the only penalty he could incur was a small fine for bathing in public. Accordingly Houdini eluded police watchers and did his manacled dive. When he emerged from the water an apoplectic *Schutzmann* was already rushing to the scene. A solemn police magistrate decided that the proper charge was walking on the grass, and for this misdemeanor Houdini duly paid a few pfennigs. The local press dealt with the incident with considerable reticence. It was true that no one had ever performed such a feat before, but after all, *verboten* was *verboten*. Before the end of his engagement in Dresden, however, the chief of the Royal Saxon Police sufficiently forgave Houdini to permit him to demonstrate his skill at headquarters, and after Houdini had freed himself from a fine assortment of German handcuffs within a few minutes, the chief gave him an official certificate handsomely commending his prowess.

Toward the end of the month the enthusiastic Herr Direktor, conscious of the fact that Houdini's run had broken all records for paid admissions to his theater, was wiring frantic appeals to the management of the Wintergarten, Berlin, where Houdini was scheduled to appear

through October, to let him present Houdini for another month. The Wintergarten management had already plastered Berlin with signs reading simply:

Wintergarten

HOUDINI

im

Oktober

Dresden's request was callously refused. Houdini moved on to Berlin, and every night the huge Wintergarten was packed to the doors. The police had to intervene several times and reprimand the management for overcrowding. In order to keep Houdini through November, the Wintergarten paid Ronacher's, Vienna, where he was booked for that month, a forfeit of four thousand marks.

On returning to the Alhambra, London, in December, Houdini found himself featured even above the famous ballet. Every day a dozen sandwich-men plodded in parade along Pall Mall bearing huge double posters with the magic words "Houdini—Alhambra." "Not bad for Dime Museum Harry," Houdini wrote in his diary.

By this time Houdini was growing painfully homesick for his mother. He had always shared his high hopes with her, and his petty successes, and now that he had scored a real triumph he felt that he could not go on much longer without having her at hand to behold his name blazoned in letters of fire in front of the famous theaters, to gaze on the packed, enthusiastic audiences, and to have her heart warmed by his newly-won honors.

The main difficulty was expense. Houdini was fast becoming the sensation of the great European halls, but he had not yet cashed in on his success. Not naturally a shrewd bargainer, he was still working for comparatively small salaries.

Yet he wanted his mother, and his longing took concrete shape one day toward the end of January, 1901, when he saw in a London shop window a life-sized model of a gown that had been originally designed for Queen Victoria, who had died January 22. The gown, he estimated, was about his mother's size. While Houdini gazed at it, with an ambitious plan unfolding in his mind, two clerks entered the window and began removing it from the model. Houdini immediately marched into the shop and offered to buy it.

The shopkeeper was somewhat shocked—one really did not sell her Majesty's relics. However, when Houdini assured the man that he wanted it for his mother, the shopkeeper agreed to sell it for fifty pounds, with the stipulation that it must never be worn by any one in Great Britain.

"As I walked out with that dress in my possession," Houdini noted in later years, "I would not have changed places with any crowned head in the world."

He immediately wrote his mother, to urge her to pay him a visit, and to hold out the fair promise of a huge and interesting surprise.

His mother arrived while he was in Hamburg, playing at the Hansa Theater. A special benefit night happened

to be scheduled for the date of her arrival, and Houdini was to be presented with a silver bowl. The unprecedented price of thirty marks was charged for admission, but the house was sold out to the doors, and Houdini was told it was impossible to find a place in the audience for his mother. Immediately Houdini notified the manager that unless his mother were seated in one of the private boxes, he would not go on that night. A chair was then placed for her in the upper tier.

At the close of his engagement, Houdini took his mother to her old home in Budapest. He had so little money that they had to sit up all night in a second-class coach.

Once in Budapest, Houdini was determined that his mother's return should be a glittering contrast to her ignominious departure, years before. With tender enthusiasm, and a natural flair for the dramatic, he planned a regal reception in which she should be the central figure. The Royal Hotel was the place of entertainment de luxe in Budapest. The pride of the hotel was the palm-garden salon, resplendent with magnificent tapestries, graceful fountains, luxuriant palms, and the gilded, rococo furnishings of the time. Houdini, short of cash but with the air of a millionaire, went to the management, and offered to engage the palm garden for his mother's reception.

The manager refused. The sacred palm garden could not be reserved for private parties.

"After listening patiently to his remonstrances," Houdini wrote in an autobiographical fragment, "I revealed

to him my plot to crown my little mother and allow her to be Queen Victoria for a few fleeting hours. He immediately consented to become my confederate, for the scheme appealed to his sportsmanship, and he said, 'My boy, for so worthy a cause you may have the room for nothing.' Accordingly the scene was set."

Of course Houdini invited every one who had ever known his father or mother to the reception, including especially his mother's Uncle Heller, the aristocrat of the family, who had opposed her marriage to Dr. Weiss and had absented himself from the ceremony. Uncle Heller, now very old, came; every one came. "How my heart warmed to see the various friends and relatives kneel and pay homage to my mother, every inch a queen, as she sat enthroned in her heavily carved and gilded chair," recorded Houdini. The manager of the hotel entered into the spirit of the occasion by donning the clothes he reserved only for receiving royalty, and thus attired, he bowed all the guests into the salon. It was a big party.

"That night," Houdini concludes, "Mother and I were awake all night talking over the affair, and if happiness ever entered my life to its fullest, it was in sharing Mother's wonderful enjoyment at playing a queen for a day. The next morning, after having lived two ecstatically happy days, I escorted the Fairy Queen Mother en route to America."

Houdini does not mention that he had to borrow carfare to get out of town. That was an anti-climax, but it did not matter.

Thereafter ensued a succession of triumphs for Houdini, throughout Germany and in cities of other continental countries.

At the Colosseum in Essen, Ruhr, in May, 1901, his engagement was extended from ten days to an entire month. The front doors had to be removed and a side wall torn down to enlarge the space for standees, who were charged eight marks, and the full stage was sold out at premium prices. The men at the Krupp works devised a new handcuff and challenged Houdini to free himself from it. On the night of the trial the Krupp force bought up the whole house, and when the general public found itself turned away, there was a serious riot in front of the theater. Houdini got himself free from the Krupp cuffs in a few minutes and found himself a hero to the Germans. He had to repeat the performance for a regular audience the next evening.

The Circus Corty-Althoff was famed for its horses. Because of a contagious disease, the horses were all condemned and slaughtered by the German government. A circus without horses was unheard of. In despair, Herr Direktor Althoff engaged Houdini, to join him at Dortmund. As soon as Houdini arrived, he visited police headquarters and escaped from the heavy irons that had been worn by the murderer Glowisky who had been beheaded three days previously with the irons on him. With this sensational start, Houdini proceeded to break all records for the horseless circus. He continued with it successively to Bochum, Osnabrück, and Cologne, and Herr Althoff

declared that in the fifty years since the circus was established it had not enjoyed such receipts.

A series of similar successes followed the circus engagement. Through the fall of 1901 packed and usually record houses greeted Houdini through successive engagements at Prague, Hanover, Copenhagen, Mannheim, and Bremen.

It was during the engagement at Hanover that Houdini was first able to make a profound impression with his strait-jacket escape. Houdini got the idea of this feat originally in Canada in 1897, just after he had purchased the Marco show. While in St. Johns, he was invited to visit a large insane asylum. His own account of the impression this made on him throws an interesting sidelight on his method of working up ideas for his entertainments. In an article printed in 1907 for circulation only among fellow magicians, he wrote:

"Through the bars of the cell door, I saw a maniac struggling on the canvas-padded floor, rolling about and straining each and every muscle in a vain attempt to get his hands over his head and striving in every conceivable manner to free himself from his canvas restraint, which I later on learned was called a strait-jacket.

"Entranced, I watched the efforts of this man, whose struggles caused him to stream with sweat, and from where I stood I noted that had he been able to dislocate his arms at the shoulder joints, he would have caused his restraint to become slack in certain parts, thus allowing him to free his arms. However, since the straps were

drawn tight, the more he struggled the tighter his restraint encircled him, and eventually he lay exhausted, panting and powerless to move.

"This was the first time I saw a strait-jacket, and it made such a vivid impression on my mind that I hardly slept that night. In such moments as I did sleep I dreamed of strait-jackets, maniacs, and padded cells. The very next morning I obtained a jacket from the asylum. During one entire week I practiced steadily and then presented it on the stage, making my escape behind a curtain."

However, the act did not make a hit. Houdini would emerge from behind the curtain, after releasing himself, with hair disheveled, countenance dripping with perspiration, trousers covered with dust, and often his clothes torn, but hard-boiled spectators assumed that these evidences of great struggle were largely hokum. Later he effected his release in full view of everybody, but American audiences still showed a lack of enthusiasm, and he virtually abandoned the act for stage purposes.

In Hanover, after Houdini had escaped from the police manacles, Count Schwerin, who was chief of police, suggested that his warders had a strait-jacket for violent prisoners which was probably the only restraint in Germany that could hold Houdini.

"Lace me in it," Houdini demanded.

The strait-jacket was indeed a formidable restraint, of heavy canvas reënforced with thick leather. The Count was reluctant to permit Houdini to risk breaking his bones

in that contraption, but he was a bit disturbed over the failure of his handcuffs, and finally he ordered his men to strap Houdini in.

It took Houdini one hour and twenty-nine minutes to get free, and by that time he was a mass of bruises, and his clothes were in tatters. "The pain, torture, agony, and misery of that struggle will forever live in my mind," he wrote in his diary. But the feat was worth while. It created a real sensation among the German public. By the time Houdini quit Germany for a period in December, and opened in Paris at the Olympia Theater, he was able to command the highest salary ever paid there to a foreign performer. His engagement was prolonged to two and a half months.

During part of this engagement Otero, the famous Spanish star of that day, also appeared on the bill. Otero's dressing-case was fitted with three keys, which were kept by three different personal attendants. In spite of these precautions, on her last night all three keys were missing. Otero gave a display of temperament which reduced the managers to thoughts of suicide—or murder—until some one thought of Houdini. The American said he would be glad to open the case if it were brought to his dressing-room. At this, however, Otero went into hysterics once again. "What! Permit a stranger to remove her precious bag! Nevaire!"

Houdini, importuned again, entered the lady's room, picked up the case, turned his back to her for an instant

and returned the case to her opened. Peace was restored. One may be sure that the newspapers made the most of this morsel.

Returning to Germany, for an engagement at Cologne, Houdini found himself facing a serious threat to his career. It was part of the duty of the Kaiser's bailiffs to protect the public against fraudulent performers, and some of the hounds of the law exercised their powers without much discrimination. In Cologne a police officer named Werner Graff published an article in the *Rheinische Zeitung* denouncing Houdini as a charlatan and his handcuff act as a swindle. With American intrepidity and a shrewd eye to publicity values, Houdini decided to hale Werner Graff into court and fight the thing to a finish. He had difficulty in finding an attorney to handle his case, for in the Kaiser's Germany it was not always healthy to go picking legal quarrels with the *Polizei*. An attorney was found, however, and Houdini brought suit against Schutzmann Werner Graff and the Cologne police for criminal libel.

In fact Houdini had prepared for the case before the libel was brought. He had not entered on his career of jail-breaking and freeing himself from handcuffs in German cities without careful preliminary training. During his first engagement at the Wintergarten in Berlin, he unostentatiously apprenticed himself to a Berlin locksmith who had a shop on Mittel Strasse. During the two months of his stay in Berlin, Houdini spent from six to ten hours a day working in this man's shop, particularly picking

locks. In order that Houdini might familiarize himself with the locks used on police chains in Germany, the man ordered assortments, in quantity, of certain patterns, and would later exchange them for others. Before he left Berlin, Houdini felt pretty well assured that there was not a single type of lock used in Germany from the time of Theodoric that he could not pick. In later years he wrote that he became so familiar with the various patterns of German handcuffs that he could open most of them with his shoelace. While he was in Berlin the police loaded him with handcuffs, put on elbow irons, thumbscrews, and manacles for good measure, and chained his wrists to his ankles; but he got free without difficulty.

When Houdini's suit came to trial in Cologne, the police officer stated that he could prove Houdini a fraud by chaining him up so that he could not escape. Accordingly Houdini was very solemnly chained. After a glance at the lock, Houdini stated that he was willing to release himself under the eyes of the judge and jury, but was unwilling to let others see him operate. This was an impressive bit of showmanship, and it flattered even the judge. The court was cleared, and standing in front of the judge, Houdini whisked his chains off so quickly that none of the spectators was the wiser about his method of operation. The next morning the young American's triumph over the Kaiser's police went rumbling through the German press.

Werner Graff and his associates, however, appealed for a new trial before a higher court, and five months later

they marched into the courtroom with a lock specially prepared for the occasion, a master work of master mechanics, which, they proudly announced, when once it was locked, could not be opened even with its own key. With this contraption locked on him, Houdini was allowed to retire to a room selected by the jury, where he could work unhindered. In four minutes he smilingly reëntered the court room and handed the judges the lock, opened.

Werner Graff took an appeal to the highest court. There was much legal argument. Houdini, the Schutzmann admitted, had indeed opened certain cell doors and handcuffs, but Houdini advertised also that he could open safes, and he had not opened a single safe in Germany. Therefore, Werner Graff contended, the libel should be dismissed. Houdini's attorney ridiculed this argument. Houdini, he said, had opened all of Werner Graff's locks, and he could open safes as well.

Finally the justice wearied of the argument. He declared that he had a safe in his chambers, which offered an easy means of settling the dispute. If Houdini could open it, obviously Werner Graff had lost his case. If Houdini failed to open it, there was merit to the Schutzmann's contention.

Houdini was in a dilemma. He had never tackled a German safe, and he suspected that this untested strongbox might have a secret in its combination that would prove beyond his skill. There was nothing to do, though, but to accept the test. He requested that he be permitted to work at the safe alone, and this plea was granted.

The justice himself led the way to his chamber, and indicated a heavy steel chest of German make against the wall.

Glancing significantly at his watch, he said: "You will summon the court as soon as you are ready." Then he closed the door and Houdini was alone in the room.

For a minute or so, Houdini dared not take a step toward that formidable box. Was his continental career to end ignominiously in that room? He forced himself to cross the room, and he gave a vicious yank at the safe door. It swung open—it had not been locked.

After a decent interval he called in the court to reveal his task accomplished.

Werner Graff was fined thirty marks, as well as all costs of the three trials, but, most humiliating of all, he was compelled to publish a public apology, "in the name of the Kaiser," in all the principal German newspapers, and Houdini was permitted to insert notices of the verdict in all the newspapers in Cologne at Graff's expense. German judges had a sense of the realities.

Thereafter in Germany Houdini was more than a handcuff king and distinguished *Ausbrecher*. He was the young man who had actually whipped the *Polizei* in a court of law.

XI

HOUDINI's career through this period resembled a dream of an inspired press agent. Each engagement was a fresh triumph. His progress was a succession of broken records for crowded houses. On the stage he was constantly amazing the public with fresh feats of skill. In Paris he palmed thirty-two cards with one hand. At the Wintergarten in Berlin, in the spring of 1903, he permitted himself to be nailed up in a huge packing-box, from which he presently emerged smiling, and at successive performances he accepted challenges from various groups of carpenters to do the nailing. In London he delighted the crowds by swallowing a packet of needles and a few yards of thread and, without moving from his place, drawing the thread slowly from his mouth with the needles threaded on it at regular intervals.

Everywhere, in public demonstrations to attract attention to his shows, he whisked himself out of the jails as if the locks were made of putty. In Leicester, England, he broke out of a cell which had been specially built by Oliver Cromwell for military prisoners. In Leeds he got free from a famous murderer's cell. At Sheffield there was a murderer's cell of which the local police boasted; it had held Charles Peace, a noted jail-breaker and the most dangerous criminal England had ever had. They thought they had special knowledge of steel restraints in Sheffield, but Houdini walked out of the steel box a few minutes after

they had manacled him and locked him in. At Huddersfield, a new jail was the pride of the town. Before locking Houdini behind the bars, the chief of police confined him in heavy chain-gang manacles. Houdini was out almost as soon as the chief had turned his back. In Holland, on tour with the Corty-Althoff Circus, in the summer of 1902, he had himself manacled and chained to one of the wings of a huge windmill, with the idea of freeing himself. The wing broke, and he narrowly escaped being crushed to death; but the publicity attendant on the stunt did his reputation no harm.

Of course, with all this sensational advertising, Houdini's earnings were jumping. At Leeds, playing on a percentage basis at the close of 1902, Houdini's takings for the week were two hundred pounds, and for a return engagement, shortly afterward, they reached two hundred and fifty pounds. These were exceptional weeks. But only three years before, Houdini had looked on an engagement at sixty dollars (twelve pounds) for one week as a stroke of good fortune.

On several occasions his challengers gave him a lively time, especially when they were not inclined to play fair. At the beginning of an engagement at the New Palace Theater, Halifax, a local magician insisted on fastening Houdini with ropes and chains. Houdini was a bit doubtful about this test, for the man was really an expert, but after a severe struggle Houdini freed himself as usual. "First time it was a dangerous tie," was his brief comment in the diary. During the ensuing week at the New Palace,

Houdini surpassed by forty pounds the record attendance drawn to the theater by Sandow the Strong Man.

At Blackburn a local Strong Man, who challenged Houdini, manacled his arms behind his back with six pairs of heavy irons furnished with clanking chains and heavy padlocks. In trussing Houdini, the man twisted his arms into such an unnatural position that they were soon blue from lack of circulation. When Houdini asked that the bonds be eased, the Strong Man retorted: "Get out or give up." After nearly two hours of struggle, Houdini emerged free, with torn clothes and bleeding arms.

On a second engagement at Blackburn, a few weeks later, a man named Wilson insisted on locking Houdini in a cuff which he refused to let him inspect beforehand. Houdini insisted on looking at the cuff first, whereupon Wilson, calling the house to witness that Houdini was a quitter, started to walk off the stage while a hostile gallery booed the performer. Houdini dashed after him and snapped the handcuffs on himself. Retreating to his cabinet, he discovered that the man had cut away the inside of the locks, so that once snapped on, the cuffs would not yield to any key. After ten minutes of frantic work Houdini freed himself, and, walking to the front of the stage, angrily snapped the cuffs on two rods near the footlights. It took Wilson twenty minutes to get them off, and he had to use three kinds of instruments to do so. The audience, however, cheered Wilson and booed Houdini; yet the magician smashed all records for attendance at Blackburn, and thousands had to be turned away.

At Bradford in Yorkshire, Houdini was offered his first bribe. James Berry, a former public hangman, had taken to the less gruesome occupation of running a public house, and, on the side, advertised himself as a phrenologist and character reader, able to give "excruciatingly [sic] forty minutes' continuous entertainment." He offered to make wagers of several thousand dollars that he could tie Houdini and hold him and agreed to split his winnings if the Handcuff King would pretend that he could not escape. "Guess he didn't know how I was brought up," was Houdini's comment in the diary.

By 1903, Houdini was such a success that handcuff kings, most of them claiming to be the original, were springing up all over Europe. Most of them were poor charlatans who escaped from prepared cuffs that either had no locks whatever or were cleverly made so that the lock could be released by pressing a secret spring. Others were skilled performers who had managed to pick up some of Houdini's secrets.

Whether they were charlatans or genuine imitators, Houdini followed their careers with intense interest. In the years after 1907, when he was developing his feat of leaping off bridges handcuffed and freeing himself under water, a few of his rival "Handcuff Kings" essayed the same trick, and occasionally one or another of them failed to come up. In Houdini's diary in the spring of 1909 he pasted a brief news dispatch from Landshut, Bavaria, clipped from the London *Daily Mail* of April 16. The story ran:

"A so-called 'Handcuff King' named Ricardo, who has been appearing at a music hall here, sprang this morning heavily manacled from the Luitpold Bridge, purposing to take off his handcuffs under water. He failed in the attempt and was drowned."

Below this grim item Houdini wrote: "Failure meant a lingering death."

Some of the "Handcuff Kings," particularly the frauds, made a point of advertising that they had worsted the great Houdini in a public contest and wrested his laurels from him. Whenever Houdini heard of one of these boasters, he at once dashed off to the place where the fellow was appearing and subjected him to a public humiliation that ended his career in that territory.

While touring Holland with the Circus Corty-Althoff in the summer of 1902, Houdini received from a friend in Dortmund the advertisements of one Kleppini who described how he had escaped from all of Houdini's handcuffs while he had left Houdini standing helpless on a public stage, securely fastened in Kleppini's cuffs.

Houdini wangled a leave of absence from Herr Althoff, and packing a small grip with an assortment of irons, took the first train for Dortmund. Disguised as an old man, he went to the circus where the charlatan was performing, and in the midst of Kleppini's speech telling how he had defeated Houdini, the latter leaped on the stage, tore off his false beard in the dramatic manner he loved, and cried: "I am Houdini. I dare you to

let me lock you up. Here are five thousand marks which are yours if you can escape."

Kleppini managed to evade an immediate trial of skill, but the crowd jeered him, and afterward his manager felt compelled to call on Houdini at his hotel and discuss terms for a challenge.

Incidentally he insisted on inspecting Houdini's collection of cuffs. A French letter cuff, opening by a combination of five letters, attracted his attention. After expressing his admiration for the workmanship, the manager, in a tone of feigned indifference, asked what combination of letters opened the cuffs. Houdini, seemingly falling into the trap, first exacted a promise that the manager would not tell Kleppini. Then he said that the combination formed the word *clefs* (keys), and showed the man how the cuffs worked.

The next evening when the American appeared at the circus, with his collection of cuffs, for the trial, Kleppini at once pounced on the French cuffs. He dashed off to his cabinet with them and presently returned with an air of triumph.

"I will open these cuffs," he shouted. "I challenge Houdini to lock them on me. I'll show him tonight that we Germans lead the world."

Such was the man's eagerness that Houdini had difficulty in getting the cuffs away from him, but he in turn insisted on inspecting them for a minute, which was enough for his purpose. At nine o'clock the irons were for-

mally snapped on Kleppini, and he bounded into his cabinet, shouting that he would be out free in a few seconds.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you may all go home," Houdini said. "I do not lock a cuff on a man merely to let him escape."

By 10:30 the last circus act was concluded, but Kleppini was still in his cabinet. An hour later the last jeering burgher had departed, and Manager Sidoli instructed his stage hands to pitch the cabinet, with Kleppini in it, off the stage. Kleppini, still manacled, ran into the manager's room, and before another hour was up, he sent his wife to Houdini to beg his release.

Houdini refused to go to him until newspaper witnesses had been summoned. He found the letter combination still adjusted to the word *clefs* and poor Kleppini staring at it sullenly.

"Didn't you guess that I would change the combination out on the stage when you handed me back the cuffs?" Houdini said. "Look. The letters now spell a good American word that means Kleppini."

Quickly he turned the five-letter combination until the letters "F-R-A-U-D" came together, and the handcuffs fell open.

That was the end of Kleppini.

In the spring of 1903, Houdini determined to add Russia to his conquests and accepted an invitation to open at the Establishment Yard, in Moscow, in May. Breaking into Russia, the jail-breaker discovered, was no mean task. One had to produce a passport with a Russian visa—such

documents were a rarity in those happy days—certificates of one's personal effects, certificates of religion, and various other papers required by Tsarist red tape. Mrs. Houdini filled out the religious certificates for both, attesting that she was a Roman Catholic in good standing. Jews were not admitted to the Tsar's domain.

Whenever he appeared in a foreign country, Houdini always made his opening address at each performance in the language of that country. If the language was strange, he hired an instructor before the opening and memorized the speech with him, subsequently reciting it more or less parrot-wise. While at the Wintergarten in Berlin, in April, he secured an interpreter who taught him his Russian speech. Houdini had it pat, but after his arrival at Moscow, in order to avoid accidents, he asked the manager of Establishment Yard to hear him recite it.

The manager listened and tore his hair.

"My God, we would be ruined!" he cried, in German. "That isn't Russian. You are speaking Polish, which is strictly forbidden, and you have learned it with a strong Yiddish accent, which makes the offense much worse."

Accordingly Houdini had to memorize his little blurb all over again, rather hastily this time, as he was to appear the next evening. After he had straightened out the language, he went for a walk in one of the parks, absorbedly declaiming the lines for practice: "I am Houdini, the greatest of jail-breakers and handcuff kings. No prison can hold me. I have been confined in all the most famous prisons in the world," etc.

After a time, Houdini observed a pair of tall loiterers watching him with intent curiosity. Thereafter men seemed to be following him discreetly, but with his usual single-mindedness Houdini continued his practicing as he paced to and fro. He had to be letter-perfect for the next day.

Late in the afternoon he started to leave the park, when suddenly a veritable army of policemen leaped out from the shrubbery, and the Handcuff King was handcuffed and rushed off to a dungeon. The secret police were not sure whether he was a madman or a very dangerous criminal, but they took no chances in the land of the Tsar.

When he did not get back to the hotel for dinner, Mrs. Houdini, greatly disturbed, sought out the manager of the theater. Mystified at the disappearance, he finally got in touch with the police. They found the Handcuff King, still heavily manacled, sitting in a cell before which half a dozen armed turnkeys stood guard. He was grinning rather sheepishly. Explanations were quickly made and the prisoner released. This was the only cell in which he was ever confined in Europe from which Houdini had not freed himself by his own prowess.

After a few days Houdini returned to the headquarters of the secret police with the request that he be allowed to demonstrate his skill on their restraints. First the officers demanded some tricks; so Houdini demonstrated three-card monte and the old American shell game, the stand-by of our country fairs. None of the various officers could pick the queen among Houdini's three

cards and none could pick the shell which housed the little pea, even though he performed very slowly. Instead of being complimentary about his skill, they seemed to resent it, and when he suggested a test of jail-breaking, the chief, Lebedeff, replied that he might try to escape from the *carette*—if he could—whereupon the other officers nudged one another and laughed.

A *carette* did not sound very formidable, but it proved to be a sort of steel safe on wheels, with two heavily-barred air vents, used for transporting his Majesty's very special prisoners to Siberia. Houdini declared that he would take a chance at it, and there was more Tartar amusement.

First he was stripped and searched, and as soon as they started searching him, Houdini realized that he had never really been searched before. He was laid on a table, and one man started at his head and worked down to his feet, while another started at his feet and worked up to his head. Then he was turned over, and the dual process was repeated. His body was then twisted and turned in every imaginable way, quite as if he were a real criminal.

Then, stark naked, he was led out into the prison yard, which was very cold. The *carette* was searched in the same meticulous manner, and finally Houdini was locked in. It was not until the door had been firmly fastened behind him that Chief Lebedeff informed him that the key used for locking the prison van did not unlock it. The nearest unlocking key was in the possession of a prison warder on the Siberian border, about twenty-one days'

journey distant from Moscow. "It would be a cold trip," remarked Lebedeff politely.

Houdini had stipulated that the *carette* be backed against the prison wall, so that he might work in secret. On the inside the door was merely a smooth sheet of steel, without any sign of a lock, but with a little high window six inches square, crossed by four bars. The lock was on the outside of the door, about thirty inches below the window. Through the awkwardly barred window aperture Houdini had to do his work. For half an hour he struggled with the lock while the police chuckled outside. Then, after a short rest, he resumed, and forty-five minutes after he had been incarcerated, the door swung open. Houdini was utterly exhausted and streaming with sweat despite the intense cold.

As Houdini stepped out, he expected a chorus of applause, but instead he was immediately seized and searched all over again. Also his attendant, Franz Kukol, an Austrian, who had not been permitted to approach the *carette*, was stripped and searched. Lebedeff had promised Houdini a certificate if he escaped, but Houdini was unable to secure this.

No newspaper men had been permitted to witness the test, but the story got about, and Houdini became a popular hero; for every one hated the secret police. Great throngs stormed the doors of Establishment Yard to see him, and the manager doubled his salary. Originally he had come to Russia for one month. His stay was prolonged to four, including a brief engagement at the capital, then

St. Petersburg, and three weeks at the famous Nizhni-Novgorod fair. The Russian people, from muzhiks to grand dukes, seemed to have a natural love for magic and mystery, and they fairly idolized this clever young mage from the Far West.

That is, they all idolized Houdini except the domestic magicians. These gentlemen appeared to appreciate him no more than did the Tsar's police. In chorus they belittled his skill, but none challenged him to a competition. The attacks culminated in a satirical interview on Houdini, by Robert Lenz, the dean of Russian practitioners of the White Art, in a smart magazine called *Diversion*. Magician Lenz asserted that Houdini had nothing new; he was "merely warming over old soup." Why, lamented Lenz, he himself had performed the trunk trick years before, and under much more difficult conditions, for his own wife (who appeared in his place in the trunk after he had been locked in it) was heavy and fat, while Houdini's wife was but a mite of a woman. As for handcuffs, Lenz solemnly warned the public that Houdini used prepared cuffs and opened only specially prepared locks. In fact, Lenz concluded, Houdini had only one extraordinary quality, and that was his impudence.

The crowds continued to flock to Houdini, nevertheless. When he reached St. Petersburg the Grand Duke Sergius invited the American to give a special exhibition at his palace. Houdini performed there before a distinguished company. At the conclusion of his acts, the Grand Duke announced that for more than a month he had had the best

locksmiths of the Empire building a chest for him which could not be unlocked. If Houdini really had power over locks, he could demonstrate it by opening that chest. A curtain was thereupon drawn aside in a corner of the hall and revealed a formidable steel casket.

Houdini said he would make the trial under three conditions: First, he must be allowed to inspect the chest, not necessarily alone; second, he was to be stripped and subjected to a complete examination by surgeons before he attempted to open the chest; third, the lights must be out for thirty seconds when he tackled the box.

The conditions were accepted. Houdini examined the lock system while a guard of Cossacks looked on. He was taken to an anteroom, where he removed his clothes and physicians searched his person thoroughly, including the orifices of his body. Then, still under guard, he marched up to the chest, the lights snapped out, and when they blazed out again half a minute later, the big casket lay open.

Years later, recalling the incident to a friend in New York, Houdini was asked to explain the miracle.

"There is one place where ordinary people do not think to look," he said. "I had my picklock fastened to the sole of my left foot with surgeon's cement."

"Suppose they had asked you to lift your feet?" said the friend.

"I had several lines of defense. My patter was designed to make them do the thing the way I wanted it done. I gave a few false trails. Then, if worst came to worst, you

know that I can do a trick or two with my toes. I was confident that they could never find anything."

On later occasions, when Houdini was being stripped and searched for one of his jail-breakings, he was accustomed to remind the searchers that they had not inspected the soles of his feet. It is apparent, therefore, that if he was under the necessity of concealing something, that was not the hiding-place.

Houdini's earnings for the week in which he gave the private exhibition before the Grand Duke were three hundred and fifty pounds, a high record for a performer in Europe. He was only twenty-eight years old.

Returning to England, Houdini continued his triumphal progress. In every town ambitious newspaper reporters, locksmiths, police officials, and rival magicians poured on him a succession of handcuff challenges, and Houdini escaped from their restraints with increasing ease.

At the London Hippodrome, in March, 1904, he faced one of his most difficult tests. A representative of the London *Daily Mirror* had discovered a blacksmith of Birmingham who after five years of labor had devised a lock which, he asserted, no human being could pick. The blacksmith had fitted his lock on a pair of handcuffs riveted to a piece of tubular steel like a sawed-off gun barrel. The *Mirror* submitted this restraint to the best locksmiths of London, who unanimously declared that it was a perfect piece of mechanism. With this backing the *Mirror* challenged Houdini.

At a matinée, before a highly excited audience of four

thousand, a representative of the *Mirror* snapped his "darbies" over Houdini's wrists, and the performer retired to his "ghost house" to wrestle with the strange lock. After half an hour Houdini emerged, his collar broken and water streaming down his face, and asked for a pillow to kneel on, as his knees hurt. The *Mirror* man, mindful of confederates with hidden tools, went out and procured a pillow himself. Twenty-five minutes later, Houdini appeared again, still handcuffed, and apparently greatly exhausted. He requested the challenger to remove the handcuffs for a minute, in order that he might take off his coat.

The representative of the *Mirror* cannily refused. Houdini had seen the cuffs locked, but not unlocked, and the challenger sidestepped giving him that advantage. Houdini then, after some maneuvering, managed to get a pen-knife from his waistcoat pocket. This he opened with his teeth. Then, turning his coat inside out over his head, he proceeded to cut it to pieces, while the crowd shouted.

Again he vanished into the cabinet, and just as the crowd was settling back for another long wait, he bounded out with the gleaming handcuffs dangling open in his hand. The task had taken him seventy minutes. It was a mighty victory. With a roaring crowd behind him, he was carried home in triumph to his lodgings, and the next day all the London papers gave fulsome accounts of his achievement, with the *Mirror* yielding a particularly handsome tribute. Within a few days Houdini was signed for a tour of sixteen weeks at a salary of £150 ($750) a week.

At the conclusion of this tour, having conquered Europe and in four years sprung from complete obscurity to a foremost position among European entertainers, Houdini decided to tackle his own country. His diary for May 27 contains the single note: "Arrange to SAIL FOR HOME." Though his pockets were jingling with money, he characteristically decided to go back second class, as he had come. Though he went about squandering money as fast as he made it on books, souvenirs, playbills of every sort, and numerous personal benefactions, he was always most frugal in the matter of lodgings and travel, and almost invariably entered the cost of such items in his diary, not infrequently complaining that charges were too high. Martin Beck, who happened to be traveling on the same steamship with Houdini this trip, offered to pay the extra expense if Houdini would move into the first cabin, but this offer was curtly rejected.

"I'd rather travel as I am," commented Houdini, noting the offer in his diary.

Thereafter, for several days, the daily entries consisted of one scraggly word: "Seasick."

XII

DURING his first trip to Europe, Houdini developed an avocation from which, for the remainder of his life, he got almost as much enjoyment as he did from breaking out of jails or vanishing from sealed chests.

For the first time in his life he had more money than he needed, and also, playing only two shows a day at first-class houses, he had more leisure than he had ever enjoyed before. From his early years he had the habit of poking into old book shops, picking up second-hand books on magic whenever he could afford them. Now he had ample time to prowl about to his heart's content and buy what he wanted. He soon became an ardent hunter after all sorts of literature and memorabilia bearing on the art of magic.

Houdini in fact inherited from his father the patient fury of the scholar for seeking original sources. Though his formal education had been pitiably slight, and in strictly business matters he always remained naïve, he had a natural instinct for research which made him a formidable collector from the start. He had the true collector's delight in following odd trails that led to neglected authorities and forgotten sources. He was always hunting up aged collectors or retired magicians who might possess documents of value. To proprietors of old bookshops and curiosity shops in England, France, and Germany, as well as in the United States, he became a familiar

figure, and to them he revealed a personality quite different from that of the showman and wizard of escape. He made some intimate friends among these crusty old bookworms.

In this period Houdini laid the foundation of his various collections, which during the next quarter century were to reach truly monumental proportions. Thanks to Houdini the collector, the Library of Congress in Washington can boast the most complete assemblage of volumes on magic and spiritualism in the world, many of the volumes dating back to the earliest literature on these subjects. Houdini had gathered 5200 of these books, some of them of great rarity, and he bequeathed them to the Library at the suggestion of his friend Dr. Henry Ridgely Evans of Washington.

More unique, even, was his collection of playbills of magicians of older days and newspaper clippings describing their performances. Houdini left some 40,000 such items, including mementos of all the principal occidental practitioners of the art.

As time went on, his passion for such accumulations increased. He was determined to excel in the library as he did as a performer, and stories of rival collectors spurred him to greater effort. In all Houdini's thirty years of keeping a diary, his greatest note of exultation was sounded when Dr. Saram R. Ellison, whose library of magic was famed throughout the world, admitted after looking over Houdini's books that they were a more complete collection than his own and declared that Hou-

dini's historical collection of programs had no rival anywhere. Some of Houdini's most spectacular jail-breaking stunts are barely recorded in the diary, but Dr. Ellison's tribute was the occasion for a full page of self-congratulations.

In later years the zeal for collecting led Houdini into fields other than magic. Lincoln was one of his heroes; therefore he accumulated the largest number of Lincoln letters held by a private collector. He followed this with similar large collections of the letters of Robert G. Ingersoll and Clyde Fitch. Somewhere he read of a man who had original signatures of all the signers of the Declaration of Independence except six. Houdini immediately went gunning for these immortals, from John Hancock down, and within a reasonable time he had original signatures or letters of all save two or three. His dramatic library grew to unusual proportions, and his dramatic playbills included such rarities as the first bill of the old John Street Theater in New York, where the élite of the metropolis first assembled in 1767. He owned the original Martin Luther Bible, with marginal notes in Luther's own hand, and he treasured the portable writing-desk used by Edgar Allan Poe.

For several months after Houdini's death, rare books, pamphlets, playbills, and miscellaneous articles, for which he had left standing orders, poured in on his executrix from almost every part of the world. The aggregate charges for these posthumous additions to his collections

ran close to twenty thousand dollars, and the bills had to be paid.

Such were the results of his early habit of loitering about old book-stalls. During his first European trip, Houdini's search for first-hand sources and mementos of his art was pointed by his ardent curiosity about Robert-Houdin (1805-1871), the man whose name he had appropriated and who was his model. Houdini, then in his twenties, conceived the ambitious idea of gathering material for a comprehensive memorial of the master. Houdini's quest led him into some strange adventures and contacts.

While poking about for sources, Houdini learned that Wibjalba Frikell, a contemporary of Robert-Houdin and one of the noted magicians of his time, was still alive, in his eighty-seventh year, and living in retirement near Dresden. Highly excited, Houdini wrote to the old man from Cologne in the spring of 1903, to ask for an interview. In reply he received an unsigned card on which were written but two words: "*Herr verreist*"—"The master is on tour."

Houdini took a week off to run down his man. He arrived at Kötchenbroda, a suburb of Cologne, where Frikell lived, at four in the morning. Having located the house, he walked about impatiently for four hours until he could decently ring the doorbell. Frikell's wife, manifestly agitated at the call, assured him that Herr Frikell had gone away.

In the village Houdini learned that Frikell had lived the life of a hermit for many years. In his youth he had had an illegitimate son who, as he grew up, had subjected Frikell to a series of embarrassments and annoyances, until he had withdrawn from society. At a later date Houdini learned that Frikell assumed that the importunate stranger who insisted on seeing him had come for purposes of blackmail.

Later in the day Houdini returned to the house. He posted a photographer across the street, determined at least to get a photograph of the old magician if he could lure him to the door. The door, however, was not opened again. Frau Frikell merely poked her head out of an upper window. For hours Houdini pleaded with her, telling her of his projected book, of certain gaps in it which only Frikell could fill, of the obligation they had in common to the literature of magic. The tears ran down Frau Frikell's cheeks, but she refused to open the door. Near her, unseen by Houdini, the aged magician listened grimly behind a shutter. Late in the afternoon the visitor yielded and went away.

Houdini's week of leisure was not wasted, however. Near Dresden he discovered the neglected grave of Bartolomeo Bosco (1793-1863), one of the most famous sleight-of-hand artists, whose name is still used by fakirs who eat 'em alive at country fairs throughout Europe and America. Bosco, as a youth of nineteen, was drafted into Napoleon's army and left for dead on the field of Borodino. While a Cossack ghoul, who was looting the corpses,

searched the supposed corpse of Bosco, the young man by sleight of hand relieved the unsuspecting intruder of all his loot. He lived to amaze Europe for many years with his feats.

Houdini found that the leasehold of Bosco's grave was about to expire, and Bosco's bones would be removed to the potter's field, so he bought a perpetual deed to the plot so that the famous old performer could lie in peace. The deed is now owned by the Society of American Magicians. This was the first of over half a dozen graves of magicians that Houdini purchased during his life.

Houdini did not give up Frikell because of his first repulse. He continued to bombard the old hermit with letters and with clippings about his work, and finally, during his trip to Russia, Frikell made his first response. He would be glad, he wrote, to receive from Houdini a package of a certain brand of Russian tea, of which he was very fond. Houdini shipped the tea immediately. Then came a gracious letter inviting Houdini to call next time he was near Kötchenbroda.

Houdini made the earliest possible engagement for Dresden, intending to spend all his spare time with Frikell. In preparation for his coming, he persuaded the old man to have his photograph taken. One thing and another prevented Houdini from visiting Kötchenbroda until the end of the week. A strange woman opened the door. "You are being waited for," she said, and led Houdini into a room where Frikell lay—dead.

The old man, excited over receiving a visitor after his

years of self-imposed seclusion, had dressed himself in his best and got out all his treasures, mementos and souvenirs of the old days. He had seemed almost young and happy once more. But the excitement had proved too much for him. About an hour before Houdini arrived, he had suddenly clutched at his heart and fallen lifeless to the floor.

Almost equally dramatic was Houdini's meeting with Henry Evans Evanion, an entertainer and collector for over half a century, from whom Houdini secured many of his greatest rarities in the form of old playbills and letters. Much of Evanion's material he had inherited from James Savren, an English barber with a passion for magic, who would drop his trade to travel with famous magicians and had picked up a handsome collection which he left to Evanion, his friend and rival.

While Houdini was playing at the London Hippodrome in 1904 he contracted a severe cold, was threatened with pneumonia, and for the first time in his life was compelled to cancel several performances. While he was in bed, a newspaper man who called on him printed a short article about a number of old programs and bills which Houdini had picked up and which were strewn about his bedroom. The day the article appeared, Houdini received a note from Evanion, on a stained scrap of paper, stating that he had some articles in which Houdini might be interested. Houdini replied at once, asking Evanion to call at one o'clock the next day.

Evanion failed to show up. About four o'clock Hou-

dini's physician told him he could walk once around the block in the mild sunshine. As he was leaving the hotel, the porter told him that an old man had been waiting to see him since one o'clock, but the man was so shabby and disreputable-looking that they had not permitted him to go upstairs. The porter indicated a bent figure in tattered garments who emerged tremulously from a corner of the lobby, hugging a large portfolio.

"I'm sick and dizzy; so you'll have to be quick," said Houdini. "What is it you want?"

"I have brought only a few of my treasures, sir," mumbled the old man, as he slipped open his portfolio.

With a cry of amazement, Houdini drew the old man to a settee beside him. Before him were original programs of Robert-Houdin, Philippe, Anderson, Breslaw, Pinetti, Katterfelto, Boag, all the principal conjurers of the past century, a veritable treasure trove of printed material and lithographs such as a three-year search in England and on the Continent had failed to yield him.

The next morning, without asking permission from his physician, Houdini had himself driven to the dark, littered basement on Methley Street where Evanion lived. Sorting over the precious collection, the two men lost track of time. Occasionally Evanion brewed tea on his little stove, which the two enthusiasts drank together. It was past midnight when Houdini's brother Theodore, accompanied by a thoroughly disgusted physician, traced him down and dragged him back to his hotel.

Bit by bit, during the ensuing months, Houdini pur-

chased the bulk of Evanion's collection. A year later, while playing at Wigan, Houdini received word that Evanion was dying in London of cancer of the throat. After the evening show, Houdini dashed off to London to cheer his friend and see that he had every comfort during his last days. A fortnight later he made another trip for Evanion's funeral. Houdini's diary for that day reads: "Poor Evanion. He certainly was the greatest collector of magical material in the world. Although I advertised the funeral in the papers, no one was there but four old women and two nieces, with Mrs. Evanion. Paid funeral expenses."

Before Houdini had been many months at his researches, he realized that he had been completely deceived about Robert-Houdin. According to that gentleman's own claims, which had been generally accepted, he was not only the greatest magician of his day, if not of all time, but he was the inventor of all the principal feats of magic in use.

As Houdini traced Robert-Houdin's miracles to their sources, he discovered that the man he had been worshiping had invented or originated virtually none of the marvels he claimed as his own. Robert-Houdin's orange tree, which magically flowered and brought forth fruit on the stage (through a clever system of blow-pipe stems) had done service for more than a century before he picked it up. His writing and drawing automaton had appeared fifty years before he was born; and so had second-sight, of which he proclaimed himself the originator. His inex-

haustible bottle, from which he poured successively half a dozen different wines, had a history dating back two hundred years. Others of his "creations" were even more service-worn. Moreover, contemporary evidence revealed Robert-Houdin as in many respects a mediocre performer.

Houdini dug up press records covering occasions when Robert-Houdin's memoirs recorded him as creating a sensation in some European city with a new magical elaboration. The old files showed the press supremely indifferent to his entertainment, generally failing utterly to mention it. Even Robert-Houdin's famous "memoirs" were a hoax. They were written not by Robert-Houdin but by a clever French hack, and the facts and explanations of tricks set forth in them were in most cases wholly romantic.

Houdini, now with a reputation of his own making, discovered that the man whose name he had taken had built up his reputation largely on false pretense, by broadly claiming as his inventions what he had appropriated or adapted from others. The knowledge was a sad blow. The more Houdini uncovered his hero, the more the sawdust leaked out.

For a time Houdini assumed that his researches were wasted as far as Robert-Houdin was concerned. Then he resolved to go on with his revelatory digging to the bitter end. For nearly seven years he continued, until every one of Robert-Houdin's falsely claimed creations was traced back to its true originator. Then, with the aid of a secretary who could smooth over his literary lapses, he set to work on the manuscript. On July 19, 1907, his diary re-

cords: "Wrote until 2:30 A.M. on Houdin book. This is a labor of love. I shall be happy when it is finished, as it will take a lot of worry off my mind." The next day the diary has this entry: "Finished last chapter on Houdin book. Only needs editing now."

The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin was published early in 1908.

The book was something of a bomb-shell in the world of magic. Articulate magicians, in any literary sense, had been rare, and Robert-Houdin had been so handsomely articulate, and the various volumes bearing his name had been written in such a dashing and ingratiating style, that he had come to be accepted at his own valuation, and his lofty pedestal seemed secure. When Houdini toppled him off and sought to restore to their proper places some of the men whose laurels Robert-Houdin had appropriated, many classical-minded persons resented the revaluation. To them Houdini seemed impertinent—and not a little ungrateful.

There was indeed a personal motive behind the volume, as well as a deep passion for justice and truth. In *The Unmasking* Houdini was really clearing his own name of what he now knew to be an unworthy association. The Robert-Houdin of his worship had never existed.

XIII

HOUDINI'S stay in the United States during the summer of 1904 lasted only eleven weeks. He soon found that while he could now secure engagements at first-class houses, the best money offered was much less than he had been getting in Europe. American managers were still skeptical about risking fat contracts on a magician. Accordingly Houdini cabled Harry Day to get bookings for him in England in the fall; then he set about enjoying a vacation in his own country in his own peculiar fashion.

First he purchased the large brownstone house on West 113th Street, New York, which was his home thereafter throughout his life. There he spent a good part of his vacation installing his library and other treasures, and personally cataloguing everything after a system of his own which no one else was ever able to master. In the house he installed a huge bath-room which served incidentally as a laboratory for trying out his experiments in sleight of hand and escapes. It contained a mirror about eight feet square, before which he practiced by the hour, and a tub which was almost a miniature swimming-pool, for perfecting himself in under-water feats.

He took a somber pleasure in shopping about for a family burial plot, and when one was secured, in superintending the removal thereto of the bodies of his father

and his brother Herman. "Herman's teeth," he noted carefully in his diary, "were in splendid condition."

He permitted himself one brief excursion to Chicago to visit old friends in the show business, and from there he ran out to Appleton to see his boyhood home, where he was now hailed by the local newspaper as Appleton's most famous native son. His chief dissipation was visiting a former servant of the family, who had become the mother of seven children, and several indigent old women who had been friends of the family, and all these he left better off for his coming. He also bought new outfits of clothing for two old men.

In Chicago he decided to have a new set of photographs taken for the lithographs for his coming season. For this purpose he borrowed the evening clothes of his friend Roterberg, the maker of magical apparatus. The clothes did not fit him very well, but as his own clothes rarely fitted him, the strange garments were no great handicap. He returned to England before the end of August, to spend another year.

He opened at the Hippodrome at Glasgow on September 5 before a packed house. Two days later he received a challenge from the manager of Leckie, Graham and Company, saddlery and harness makers, whose name was known throughout the United Kingdom. The firm had been perfecting a strait-jacket for a private insane asylum, and they desired to test its holding qualities on Houdini. "If you are afraid to try this in public, will you try it privately?" the manager concluded. Houdini immediately

invited the challenger to the theater. It took him fifty-five minutes to effect his escape after the company's men had spent fifteen minutes strapping him in. The attendance at the Hippodrome for the week established a new record of fourteen hundred pounds.

This was the beginning of another triumphal progress through England. His escapes from a packing-box attracted particular attention, and in every city rival packing firms deluged him with offers to furnish the box and have their men nail him up. Houdini began to combine his stunts, for greater variety. Sometimes he would have himself nailed in a box after being manacled by the police, at other times tied with ropes, again encased in a straitjacket. At one place he escaped from a sealed wicker hamper, carefully prepared for the occasion by the challenging firm. His needle trick aroused great enthusiasm everywhere, and while Houdini swallowed (or appeared to swallow) successively the needles and thread, and began to pull from his mouth the thread on which the needles were strung at regular intervals, the packed audiences would watch in a breathless silence, which would presently change to wild applause.

Houdini had practiced this trick privately ever since he ran across a description of it in an old volume years before. According to his records the trick was first introduced in Europe by K. Kraus in 1816. Houdini first saw it in his dime museum days, when he was on the same bill at the Lynn Musee Theater in Lynn, Massachusetts, with "Maxey, the Human Sewing Machine."

Almost everywhere the crowds were unprecedented. At one place, where he was working on a percentage basis, Houdini's earnings were for one week $2150 clear. On several occasions, after the show, the audience formed in tumultuous parade and cheered him to his lodgings, where they would remain until he made a speech from his window. In one house spectators sat on the roofs of the boxes.

By the beginning of 1905 Houdini received a cable offering him six weeks in the larger American cities for five thousand dollars, but he was booked in England up to midsummer.

The conquest of America began in the fall of 1905 when Houdini opened at the Colonial Theater, New York, as a top-liner, at the beginning of October. He was thirty-one and had been working for this large occasion for nearly fifteen years.

Within the next few months Houdini's feats carried his name all over the country. His first big publicity strike, which occurred in Washington, established his reputation in the United States. Curiously enough there is no reference to the adventure in his diary, though contemporary newspapers printed columns about it.

During the first days of his brief engagement at Keith's in Washington, Houdini broke out of several of the police jails of the District. Warden Harris of the Federal prison was confident that his locks would hold the elusive performer; so he invited Houdini to test his skill against Uncle Sam's system of restraint.

Houdini elected to be locked in the cell that had housed

Charles J. Guiteau, the assassin of President Garfield. This was the middle chamber of a row of three heavily barred cubby-holes, walled in solid brick masonry. It happened at the time to be occupied by a man who had strangled his wife.

The narrow door of this cell is sunk three feet in the brick wall. When the door is closed, an armlike bar projects out into the corridor and then angles to the right and slips over a steel catch which sets a spring, fastening the lock. The lock is a combination, with five tumblers.

After being stripped and searched, as usual, Houdini was locked in this cell, and his clothes were locked in another. Warden Harris, with his staff of deputies and a crowd of visiting police officials, retired to his office to await developments.

Houdini was out of his cell and in the corridor in two minutes. As he looked about him he was seized with a whimsical idea. There were eight other prisoners in the jail—two condemned murderers, four men under indictment for murder, two serving for other major crimes. Houdini opened the cell of each in turn and hustled him into another cell, where the man was tightly locked up. Houdini was still stark naked, and each prisoner was so amazed at the apparition of this unclad, authoritative intruder that he neither protested nor made any attempt to escape. Twenty-one minutes after Houdini had been locked up, he entered the Warden's office with his clothes on.

"I let all of your prisoners out," he announced, and, as

his hearers stared at him, first incredulously, and then in dismay, and a guard or two jumped toward the door, he added hastily: "But I locked them all in again."

Naturally this puss-in-the-corner game with a jail full of murderers captured the imagination of the Washington correspondents.

In Boston, two months later, Houdini repeated this stunt with variations. Superintendent of Police William H. Pierce locked him in a second-tier cell of the city jail, after he had been stripped, searched, manacled, and leg-ironed, and locked his clothes in a cell in the first tier, in another section of the prison. Twenty-three minutes later Houdini called Superintendent Pierce on the telephone from Keith's Theater, some distance away. He had slipped out of his cell, recovered his clothes, dashed up to the third tier, and released a prisoner whom he locked in his own second-tier cell, let himself through two steel doors into the prison yard, climbed the wall, and jumped into a waiting automobile. He was over the wall sixteen minutes after he had been locked up, and the drive to the theater took seven minutes.

When Houdini capped this feat, a few nights later, on the stage of Keith's Theater, by escaping from a witch's cage procured by an ambitious chief of police in Chelsea, he completely won New England. The cage was a vicious-looking contrivance of latticed steel, the upper frame of which fitted closely about the subject's body. A series of chains were wound about the prisoner and enmeshed among the bars. The whole affair was locked with a sys-

tem of padlocks. The mayor of Boston, accompanied by the whole city administration, watched while Houdini was encased in this barbaric apparatus, and over three thousand persons waited upward of an hour and a half until he managed to push aside the clanking irons and step out of the vise that had held the witches of Massachusetts Colony. Probably he would have received the keys to the city, if presenting keys to Houdini had not been obviously superfluous. Boston, a one-week town for vaudeville acts, kept Houdini for eleven consecutive weeks, and during that period talked of little else from the Back Bay to the North Shore.

Shortly after the Boston engagement, Houdini's ambitions led him to get a troupe together and go on tour with his own show. Houdini was not a sufficiently shrewd business man to manage such a venture, and his diary records his relief when the season of 1906 came to a close and his business cares were ended.

About this time Houdini performed an ingenious bit of magic, which, in the opinion of those who witnessed it, could be explained only on the theory of supernatural powers.

The demonstration occurred at a matinée at the annual meeting of a social organization in the upper part of Manhattan. Houdini borrowed three handkerchiefs, tied them together, and announced that he would make them vanish and reappear at any place suggested by any person in the audience. The handkerchiefs, being placed by Houdini under a small glass bowl, immediately disappeared. The

audience was supplied with blank cards, on which each person was to designate the place where he wished the handkerchiefs found. The ushers collected the cards in a hat, each card folded to hide the writing, and Houdini shook them up and then dumped the lot on a huge platter from which he picked three at random and asked that some disinterested person make the final choice from these. A baby was selected to choose the card, and a skeptical member of the lodge took it from the baby's hand and read it. It demanded that the handkerchiefs be transported to the top step of the pediment of the Statue of Liberty, in the middle of New York harbor.

Murmurs of surprise and incredulity came from the audience. They supposed the test would be too difficult, but Houdini expressed the opinion that the handkerchiefs would be found. A committee was organized among the spectators to make the long trip, half an hour or more to the Battery by Elevated and then across the harbor in the Government ferry. On the top step leading to the statue, as designated, they found a soldered tin box and returned with it to the hall, where, by that time, a banquet was being served. A mechanic was called in to open the casket, and within were the three handkerchiefs.

The *modus operandi* was simple, and typical of the conjurer's art. The trick was about a century old. Houdini had learned it personally from Henry Evanion.

After Houdini borrowed the three handkerchiefs and tied them together for easier manipulation, they were quickly slipped under his waistcoat and three others sub-

stituted. He dropped the three bogus handkerchiefs on a table trap, picking up the opaque glass bowl under which they were to be hidden. Then, by a carefully rehearsed bit of carelessness, he dropped and broke the bowl. To procure another, he stepped toward the wings. The attendant who handed him the fresh cover deftly extracted the real handkerchiefs from under Houdini's waistcoat and was off for the Statue of Liberty where, in due course, he was met by a tinsmith who soldered the three within a tin box which was subsequently placed on the step. The whole stage play had been carefully timed so that Houdini's assistant could catch the four o'clock boat for the Statue.

Meanwhile Houdini, turning back to his audience, made the bogus handkerchiefs vanish, delaying the action with his patter so that his messenger could get a good start. The distribution of cards and pencils for the designation of the journey of the handkerchiefs made a further interval. When the cards were collected and dumped upon the platter Houdini added at the top of the pile three designating the Statue of Liberty which he had concealed in the palm of his hand. From these three the baby was permitted to make an innocent choice. The whole startling effect was the result of careful preparation, sleight of hand, and showmanship.

Houdini's first venture in authorship had made its appearance in the spring of 1906. It was a volume of ninety-five pages, detailing the methods of burglars, sneak thieves, counterfeiters, and swindlers of various kinds,

under the title of *The Right Way to Do Wrong*. Houdini probably had assistance in the literary composition, but the close observation of the methods of the light-fingered gentlemen, and the unimpeachable moral observations for youthful readers, were typically his own. The book attracted considerable attention, and the attendant publicity advertised Houdini in fresh channels.

During the next two seasons, 1906-07 and 1907-08, Houdini made tours of all the first-class vaudeville houses of the United States and escaped from every sort of restraint that American ingenuity could devise.

His series of novel vanishing stunts on the stage was begun in Washington, D.C., in September, 1906, when he spirited himself out of a zinc-lined piano box made by William Knabe and Company.

During a five weeks' engagement at Boston at the beginning of 1907, he gave a surprising exhibition of elusive versatility. He began by escaping from a coffin with the lid screwed down, before a thousand members and guests of the Boston Athletic Association. A few days later, at Keith's Theater, he escaped from a paper box, cleverly made by a paper manufacturer with an eye for novelty and advertising. The same evening he escaped after being chained and locked on a ladder.

After worsting several ambitious packing-box crews who sought to restrain him, on successive evenings, Houdini appeared at the home of J. S. Foy, Jr., an amateur sportsman who had wagered six thousand dollars with friends that he could tie the escape artist so that he could not get

loose. Mr. Foy wound Houdini from head to feet with heavy silk fish-line, using a coarse needle and a marlin-spike to knot and mesh the cords. Houdini's throat was muffled in the cords, and his wrists were so tightly bound behind his back that the twine was lost to view in the swelling flesh. His hips and legs were encased in a network of cords. Mr. Foy took forty-five minutes to complete his job, Houdini an hour and thirteen minutes to get free. His body was a mass of welts and bruises.

A few evenings later he escaped after being bolted and riveted in an iron boiler by employees of the Riverside Boiler Works. That was Monday, February 11. On the twelfth, at the matinée, he was laced within a giant leather football and popped out a few minutes later without apparently disturbing the lacings. At the evening performance he freed himself from a hamper made of hoop-iron and fastened with padlocks. On the fourteenth, at the matinée, an insane crib from a neighboring asylum failed to hold him, and in the evening employees of the Derby Desk Company locked him in a roll-top desk from which he emerged without damage to the locks or the paneling. On the fifteenth he was encased in a glass box devised by members of the Boston Athletic Association. The box, made of three-eighths inch glass, measured 24x30x36 inches. The panes were bolted together with strips of steel padlocked on the outside with two-tumbler locks. Apparently Houdini had no difficulty in seeping through without breaking a pane. The following day was Saturday, and all he did was some magic and an escape from

a strait-jacket. "Had easy day," says the diary. "Left on the midnight for New York."

Through the spring and autumn of 1907 Houdini added to his repertoire of escapes. At Toledo, Ohio, the Marine Boiler Works challenged him to get out of one of their stoutest riveted boilers. He freed himself in eighty minutes. "Very hard job," he noted in the diary. "Must find some new way to lighten my labors." Two nights previously he had been tied up with tarred ropes by Toledo High School boys and struggled for forty-one minutes before he could wriggle free. "Hurt like hell," says the diary. Being tied with tarred ropes and being strapped to a cot with wet bandages, he discovered, were the most difficult forms of restraint, but they were not sufficiently spectacular to impress audiences as much as easier encasements.

In the fall, in San Francisco, a large paper bag prepared by a manufacturing firm failed to hold him. The bag was left intact, as it had been sealed with Houdini inside. In Los Angeles, shortly afterward, Superintendent of Mails Driscoll locked him in a government mail pouch fastened on the outside with a rotary lock. In twenty-five minutes Houdini appeared carrying the pouch, which he returned undamaged. In New Orleans he escaped from a packing-box, furnished by a dry-goods concern, which was fastened with cement-coated nails, and a few evenings later came one of his most difficult box-breaking feats, in which he managed to slip from a huge meat box which had

been left in the rain for two days so that all the boards were soaked and swollen.

In virtually every city he played he broke out of jails, and in each place where water was available, save in the midst of winter, he leaped into the water manacled. His jump through the ice in Detroit in the early winter of 1906 was the last until May of the following year. On May 7, after a series of conditioning baths in cold water, he did his first bridge jump of the season in Rochester, New York. As he leaped off the bridge a drunken man jumped after him, shouting, "Well, good-by, Harry." Houdini, as he flashed into the water, was worried about the man. "No one took any notice of him," says the diary. As the performer came up he was relieved to see the fellow wading ashore. At Pittsburgh, a fortnight later, forty thousand persons watched Houdini leap, handcuffed, from the Seventh Street Bridge. It was a record crowd for that day.

On a later visit to Pittsburgh, Houdini met with his only serious accident. He had promised to do a high dive, manacled, into the Y.M.C.A. tank, in connection with a local drive for funds. Before he jumped, the press agent of the "Y" suggested laughingly: "If you don't come up, you will make a good story for the press." Houdini miscalculated, and his head smashed into the cement bottom of the tank. He was dragged out unconscious and carried the scar on his head for the rest of his life.

In addition to these labors and recreations, Houdini

was constantly working on his *Unmasking of Robert-Houdin* up to the fall of 1907, and as early as 1906 he had begun the publication of a thirty-two-page monthly periodical, *The Conjurer's Magazine*, most of which he wrote himself, while he served incidentally as editor and business manager.

The magazine was started after Houdini had had a serious quarrel with Dr. A. M. Wilson of Kansas City, editor of *The Sphinx*, the organ of the Society of American Magicians. After his return from Europe in 1905, Houdini suggested that *The Sphinx* should devote some attention to him. Dr. Wilson retorted that *The Sphinx* would run Houdini's photograph at advertising rates. Some heated correspondence was exchanged, and as both men were hot-tempered, a bitter feud developed.

Houdini started his rival magazine. Dr. Wilson countered by relentless attacks on both *The Conjurer's Monthly* and its editor, and Houdini repaid the attacks with interest in his own editorial columns. Both men were hard hitters, and they spared no epithets. Though Houdini had to abandon publication of *The Conjurer's Magazine* when he went abroad for an extended tour in the summer of 1908, and thus lost his mouthpiece, the two enemies continued to fire broadsides at each other for more than ten years.

Finally, in 1920, friends decoyed them into a meeting in Kansas City. After some preliminary insults, they discovered that they had been fighting for so long that each had conceived a rare admiration for the other. Their

friends, who had arranged the meeting and then fled, apprehensive at their own temerity, returned to find the pair roaring with laughter over reminiscences of their long feud. Dr. Wilson dined with the Houdinis and was presented with a latchkey to the Houdini house in New York. Thereafter a room was always ready for him whenever he visited that city. The two men became at once just as ardent in their friendship as they had been in their enmity.[1]

Before he left Europe in 1905, Houdini had resolved to work up a new show, so that he could abandon the handcuff act on the stage. So many imitators had sprung up that Houdini sought something in which would-be rivals would have neither the ingenuity nor the temerity to follow him. Among the "handcuff kings" that had bobbed up in Europe were Carl Mysto, Professor Haeman, Darring (booked as "Conqueror of Handcuff Kings"), Spink, Cirnoc, and Kleppini, and in the United States Brindemour and Kilby, not to mention other sporadic performers. One of the most successful regular performers was Houdini's brother Theodore, who, under the name of Hardeen, started ostensibly as a rival, though in fact the two coöperated against the growing number of their competitors. Most of the competitors used prepared

[1] Dr. Wilson, now a brisk young man of seventy-four years, is a physician by profession, in religion a hell-fire fundamentalist, socially a tolerant and genial person who could spend a convivial evening with Mencken the damned without loss of urbanity or dignity. "Harry and I enjoyed every minute of our eleven years' war," he says. "What a pity that he passed away virtually in his boyhood! I shall never find another like him for a fight."

cuffs, and there were soon so many trick cuffs on the market that any amateur could give a plausible performance.

In the United States, also, a few daring souls began to advertise themselves as escape artists. They invited challenges from packing companies and also attempted jail-breaking. In Pittsburgh, "Raymond the Handcuff King" was almost suffocated in a packing-box in which he had been nailed by some department-store men. He was rescued by men who smashed the box with axes, and he was removed to the hospital. Another youthful "escape artist" had a similar narrow escape in Philadelphia. Likewise several of the would-be prison-breakers suffered humiliating experiences. One was caught hiding a key in the cell, before his test, and several were exposed after having bribed policemen to lend them keys to effect their escapes. All these incidents reduced the number of imitators in the jail-breaking and packing-box lines, but the attendant publicity detracted greatly from the general value of such stunts.

During his first two seasons after his return to the United States, Houdini had too many irons in the fire to make much progress toward devising a new show. Incidentally novel challenges rained on him in such close succession that new thrillers kept growing overnight. Toward the end of 1907, however, novelties in the form of challenges began to peter out, and early in 1908 he ran into some weeks of bad business. On January 20, at St. Louis, the diary reads: "Manager Tate informs me,

'You are not worth a five-dollar bill to me.' I told him, 'I hope you are mistaken.' We shall see." A few weeks later the following entry appears: "Arrived in Cleveland seven o'clock. Am not featured. Is this week the first step toward oblivion? No attention paid to me."

This slump was short-lived, however. Before long, happy managers were presenting him with silver cups or other tokens at the end of riotous engagements. Houdini had at last invented a new trick to replace the handcuff act, and as he developed and perfected this it grew in dramatic value.

This trick was an escape from a galvanized iron can, filled with twenty-two large pailfuls of water, with its lid fastened on by a dozen or more heavy outside padlocks. Enclosed in the can and rolled into his little tent after a committee had assured itself that aid from hidden confederates was impossible, Houdini would spirit himself out in about a minute, leaving the can filled to the brim and all the locks intact.

This stunt was a bit too dangerous to attract imitators. It required rare agility combined with under-water endurance, and complete equanimity of spirit. Houdini had to practice it carefully for months before he dared risk it on the stage. While he was perfecting it, in Chicago, his wife had to leave for New York for an operation. On her return he could hardly wait to get her to the hotel to test the new contrivance before her critical eye. "Bess arrives from N. Y.," runs the diary. "She saw me do the can trick, thinks it is great. I offered her ten dollars if

she could tell me how it was done. She failed to fathom trick. GOOD."

With the aid of this device he was soon "packing them in" with his usual regularity. Before long, an enterprising milk company in one of the cities he played challenged him to let them fill the can with milk instead of water. On the evening of the test a trick pony attached to the show discovered the can of milk and consumed a large portion of it, so that almost equal parts of water had to be added at the last minute, but the trick made a huge hit none the less. Thereafter milk companies in every city came forward with similar challenges, and Houdini was at last able to abandon the handcuff act to his numerous imitators.

In the spring of 1908 he wound up a coast-to-coast tour in a blaze of glory and publicity. Toward the close, he capped his list of escapes by slipping out of four hundred pounds of Weed chains, which were wound and padlocked about his person, and two tires which were squeezed over his legs and shoulders and handcuffed respectively to his ankles and to his wrists. He also did some spectacular dives into the ocean, manacled, from the Atlantic City pier.

He was now ready for another long tour of Europe. Virtually all the large cities of England, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Holland, and Belgium were clamoring for him.

XIV

HOUDINI's second continental tour, begun in the fall of 1908, lasted until the spring of 1911, with a break in the middle during which he made a trip around the world in connection with fulfilling engagements in Australia.

After his arrival in Germany, in September, 1908, he embarked on a series of engagements that lasted without gaps for a year and a half. All trouble about bookings was ended as far as he was concerned. He had only to make his choice of contracts. Had he been able to multiply himself by three, none of the three Houdinis would have had as much as a single week of idleness. To virtually every European manager, Houdini meant Standing Room Only, and often not even standing room. If the house was not filled, Houdini became restless and angry. When business grew slack, just before Christmas, 1908, he went out himself and passed handbills on the street.

At this time Houdini was thirty-four and weighed somewhat under one hundred and sixty pounds. His body was like flexible steel. It needed to be, to stand the tasks he imposed on it day after day.

He returned to Europe with an entirely new line of tricks. Handcuffs were dropped from his stage repertoire except when they were incidental to some stunt such as being nailed in a chest or hung in chains on a gibbet. When he started his tour, in Circus Busch, Berlin, September 10,

1908, several Handcuff Kings were in the audience looking for an opportunity for a bit of self-advertisement; but as Houdini did nothing with handcuffs they departed in disappointment. His new stunts, such as the water-can trick, the packing-box release, and the escape from a strait-jacket on the open stage, were all too strenuous to attract imitators. In London in the summer of 1909 one man insisted that he could beat Houdini in escaping from a strait-jacket, but after a few minutes he had to be cut out of the canvas in a fainting condition. Thereupon Houdini was strapped in an identical jacket and got free in fifty-five and one-half seconds, establishing a new record for himself.

His new performances went smoothly and uneventfully. The water-can trick held up well. The escapes from strait-jackets, packing-cases, and various other apparatuses furnished by persistent challengers, seemed to exert an unfailing fascination on large audiences.

For a period, during the early months of his tour, various swimming champions insisted from time to time that they could remain under water in the can longer than Houdini. The performer delighted to take them on, and he had a huge clock, built like a stop-watch, placed on the stage, so that the audiences could time the contests. The best of these challengers managed to remain in the can two and a quarter minutes, while Houdini, on the same occasion, stayed three minutes, thirty-two seconds. At this period he would practice holding his breath for

more than three minutes while lying on a sofa in his dressing-room.

Some sessions were made interesting by challenges from rope-tying experts who would tie Houdini in a chair with all sorts of complicated knots. He liked such tests. They took him back to his boyhood tricks at Appleton. At Camberwell, the diary records, some men tied him, using the hangman's knot and the Tom Fool's knot, and he escaped.

Once, when he permitted himself to be hanged in chains on a gibbet, he had a narrow escape from being worsted. When he called for a committee to come on the stage and lock him on the gibbet, one man who responded was drunk and in a nasty humor. He twisted Houdini's wrists in the handcuffs so that any movement was torture. "Took twenty minutes to get my hands out of the cuffs," reads the diary. "Only a piece of twine in my pocket saved me. Wrists in bad condition."

Of husky crews ambitious to construct packing-cases to hold the escape artist there was seemingly no end. Each fresh group of challengers seemed to think that their predecessors had not exercised sufficient vigilance. One of the toughest challenges was in Belfast, Ireland, where employees of the Harland and Wolff shipyards nailed up Houdini in a chest made of the timber which was being used in the construction of the *Titanic*. Houdini slipped out in a few minutes, leaving the chest intact, and added Ireland to his list of conquests. During the week twenty thousand persons had to be turned away from the theater.

There was hardly a river or harbor in northern France, Germany, or England into which Houdini did not dive manacled during this tour, and thousands of people always flocked to applaud this stunt. In fairly shallow water he would free himself at ease sitting on the bottom, in deeper water while drifting below the surface. As soon as he arrived in Europe he dove into the Spree, encased in handcuffs, from a Berlin bridge. A few weeks later he dove into the Seine from the roof of the Morgue. He did the Mersey at Liverpool, the Tay at Dundee and did jumps at Plymouth, Southampton and many other places, usually with his hands manacled behind his back and his legs chained.

The most hazardous diving stunt of his career was performed in Scotland, July 1, 1909, when he dove from the bridge of a tug into the harbor at Aberdeen in a howling northeast gale. In the morning a man was washed overboard and drowned from a fishing vessel entering the harbor, and thereafter no boats ventured out. The harbor authorities advised Houdini to postpone his attempt, but he insisted on going out in a tug to look things over. Once out in the channel, Houdini refused to yield to the tug-men who tried to dissuade him from jumping. A heavy chain was put around his neck, crossed on his breast, and each end fastened to his arms above the elbows. His hands were then handcuffed behind him. In this fashion he leaped into the churning waves, and in eighteen seconds he reappeared with his hands and arms free and was helped aboard.

On October 23, 1908, while Houdini was playing in Berlin, he celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his appearance as a boy wonder in Jack Hoeffler's Circus at Appleton, the beginning of his public career. The management of Circus Busch gave him a banquet, and he received mementos and congratulatory messages from all parts of the world.

At a Berlin restaurant at this time, a Chinese waiter was attracting much attention with his card sleights, with which he amazed the patrons. Houdini strolled into the place for supper, and when the Chinese came to his table and showed his skill, Houdini borrowed the cards. He did some sleights, and finally palmed fifty-two of the thin cards, back and front, while the Oriental's eyes nearly popped from his head. "That's not trick, gentleman," he declared reverently; "that's a gift."

Prince Frederick Leopold invited Houdini to give a private performance at his palace. Houdini and his wife, with their retinue, rode to the palace in state in two motor cars, accompanied by two outriders in uniform and white gloves, who were borrowed from the circus. The diary reads: "I did card tricks, needle, handcuffs, and finished with the can of water trick. They had a pair of their handcuffs at the palace, and I beat them easily. They were a small pair of Berliner handcuffs, the only cuffs of that kind I had seen outside of my own. . . . The young princes were greatly pleased when I took one of their silk handkerchiefs and did my old tricks with it. . . . I am to get a necktie pin."

Houdini was enjoying life to the full. His enjoyment glows through the terse notes in his diary during this period. The strain he was putting on his body day after day was such as few could stand, but he carried it off easily enough. "The act I am now doing—first the straitjacket, then the can—is the hardest on my body that I have ever attempted," he notes in the diary in September, 1908. Yet he supplemented this with his outside stunts, and day after day he was busy far into the night enlarging his collections, exploring strange cities, having grand sessions with old magicians, learning French, conducting a correspondence almost as large as that of the head of a foreign office, and occasionally indulging in a violent controversy with some person who tried to treat him unfairly or take advantage of his good nature. In addition he found time to train several young women in under-water feats, and he and Mrs. Houdini acted as managers for them with varying success.

Paris he liked especially. He loved to loiter about its odd shops on odd streets and pick up old books and curios. The night life, however, did not attract him. He visited two or three of the cafés where the tourist Americanus sprinkles roses on his inhibitions, but these bored him. After a session at Le Rat Mort he wrote decisively in his diary: "Good to see *once only*." Once some friends lured him to a place where two girls did the dog dance, but he withdrew in high indignation. "The two women who did it ought to be publicly horsewhipped," runs the diary.

Yet he was not a prude, and, as his diary shows, he had a nice appreciation of human foibles. One note in the diary reads: "Ike Rose manages Cléo de Mérode. He says she is very thrifty, saves her money, and wears gingham waists, but has a sweet disposition." Cléo was the bediamonded beauty of the halls of that day. Another note records Mr. Rose's misadventures with a pair of Siamese twins he was managing. One of the twins was seduced by a provincial manager. "Ike and the other girl have to take care of the baby," records the diary.

Another lady of the halls who cut a wide swathe among the European nobility bobs up in the diary for a time. She was on the same bill with Houdini and elected to make a confidante of Mrs. Houdini. She was a rare dark beauty. Her apartment was fitted in queenly splendor, and in the boudoir her pink perfection reposed on sheets of finest black satin. An amorous German prince had presented her with a toilet set of pure gold, and her jewels represented the taxed sweat of thousands of peasants of several countries. "I think —— must be a bad woman," Houdini confided to his diary, and speculated as to whether he was doing right in permitting his wife to associate with her. . . . The former idol of princes is now fifty and has settled down as a saleswoman in a five-and-ten emporium in New York City.

During the summer of 1909 there was a happy interval when "the two mothers"—Houdini's and his wife's—arrived from America for a two months' visit. Houdini paid their passages and expenses, gave them a salary of

five dollars each per day during their stay, and devoted all his leisure time to their entertainment. The last show they witnessed, at Plymouth, was a banner occasion. Employees of the Government Dock Yard had challenged Houdini to escape from a packing-case made of one-inch boards, nailed together on the stage with nails two and a half inches long, and the crowd about the theater was so great that three front doors were smashed and the police reserves had to be called. After Houdini got out, leaving the case intact, the crowd carried him to his lodgings in triumph. The diary notes proudly: "The two mothers and Bess at windows and hear 'em cheer me for ten minutes."

Two days later the two mothers sailed from Southampton. The night before they left, after the show, Houdini hired a motor car at Plymouth and drove all night long in a driving rain, one hundred and eighty miles to Southampton, just to kiss the mothers good-by.

During the visit the Houdini dog Charlie died, and during Charlie's brief illness, Houdini's diary is concerned with little else. They had had the dog eight years. In a sense he took the place of the child the Houdinis did not have.

"Charlie, our little dog, is very sick," is the melancholy entry in the diary, July 26. Two days later: "Charlie, our dog, dying. Have taken him away from Surgeon Thompson so he can die at home. Bess crying. I don't feel any too good." The following day: "Poor, dear little Charlie dog died. He is out of misery. Has been our only pet and earned our love."

Another entry, in the fall, gives a glimpse from another angle of Houdini's sentimental tenderness. Though there is no evidence to show that he was an orthodox follower of his father's faith, each year on the anniversary of his father's death he went to a Jewish temple and said Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. This year the anniversary found him playing in Oldham, and to his dismay there was no Jewish place of worship there. "Went to Manchester to a temple early at six o'clock," runs the diary, "and said Kaddish. One man gave me a *tallis*.[1] Placed it over my shoulders."

Early in his tour he developed a new fad, which for a time became his most absorbing study. The new passion was art—in the form of paintings, etchings, prints. Apparently he was first lured into this through his habit of attending auction sales to pick up things for his collections. Before long he began to bid on paintings.

At first he made his purchases more or less by the yard, sometimes noting in a deprecatory manner in his diary that the frames alone were probably worth what he paid. A typical entry is that of March 13, 1909, in Brussels: "Visited M. de Verli and bought a lot of oil paintings, fifteen of them, frames and all, for one hundred and sixty francs. Also bought some old-time tricks."

Houdini, however, was not the sort of person to remain a tyro in anything in which he became interested. He began to hunt up artists and critics as he hunted up magicians.

[1] A praying-shawl.

Day after day he visited public exhibitions and galleries and private collections, always persistently asking questions, absorbing. In a few months he was developing decided appreciations. He stopped buying things inclosed in frames in wholesale lots. An exultant note in the diary tells that he picked up two Hogarth engravings. He wistfully notes bidding on a painting of a village festival by Teniers the younger, which, alas, was sold far beyond his limit. For consolation, however, he picked up two examples of the school of Watteau. A typical entry in the diary is this, at Oldham: "Wrote letters most of day. Went to free library. They have a very fine collection of Turner prints, also fine paintings. Excellent place. . . . Crazy Crib Challenge." Another entry reads: "Spent an hour in British Gallery. What marvelous paintings!!!"

Mrs. Houdini was not altogether comfortable about this new passion for collecting. With a husband whose purse was always leaking, she did what she could, by suggestion, to stave off bankruptcy for the family. In Paris, in the spring of 1909, with an art-shop or auction-room seemingly at every turn, her frugal counsels at times became insistent. The following entry in the diary gives an indication how the artist of escape eluded domestic entanglements and how he spent his leisure:

"Bess and I had an argument in a taxicab last night; so I got up early and went out. Visited C. De Vere, friend of Robert Heller, and made appointment to see him Sunday at his country house *re* information old magicians. Visited Hotel Drouot, on the rue Drouot, which is the

Government place for all kinds of auctions. I bid a thousand francs on a Van Ostade, but, alas, it sold for three thousand. Bid on several paintings, but all went too high. Bought Bess a solid silver case for her handbag. It cost exactly gxx francs. I write this in cipher, hope she does not see cost. It is a very good one. Gave it to her when I came home."

Houdini conceived a great admiration for the works of W. P. Frith, who was still alive at the age of ninety, about the last of the important Victorian Academicians. Houdini had purchased two Friths, or two paintings supposed to be by Frith, of which he was very proud. In the fall of 1909, while playing in London, he decided to try to see the old master. A request for an interview brought an answer from Frith's nurse that the painter was too old to receive any one.

Houdini had a way with him, especially with old people. He sent Frith copies of his two books, *Robert-Houdin* and *The Right Way to Do Wrong*, and began writing him coaxing letters. In a few weeks the old man surrendered and invited Houdini to visit him at his house at St. John's Wood.

Houdini took his two paintings along, but their reception was a disappointment. "He treated me splendidly," says the diary. "But when I showed my two paintings, attributed to him, which I had got at an auction sale, he *denied* them; so I allowed him to destroy them. He took out a knife and cut the lady's throat on each painting." There were compensations, however. "House a regular art

gallery. Saw lots of Landseers, original Friths, copies of Rembrandt, Van Dyke, Hals, Teniers, etc." The diary records that after three hours, Houdini had to hurry away to be rope-tied to a chair by challengers at the afternoon show.

A greater interest soon supervened. At the beginning of November, 1909, while playing in Hamburg, Houdini went out to the race track and saw his first flying-machine. A certain Herr Grade actually rose in the queer contraption, circled the field in the air, and came rather clumsily to earth. As soon as he alighted, Houdini sprinted madly across the field and collared the astonished aviator.

"Is this for sale?" he demanded. "How much are they worth? Where can I buy one right away?"

He learned that he could buy a Voisin plane for about twenty-two thousand francs. He was so excited that on the way back to town he got into a pitched battle with a taxi driver. Within a week he was the owner of the Voisin and hired a wooden house to store it, at a cost of six hundred and fifty marks. Thereafter Frith, Teniers, Turner, and Hogarth vanish from his diary. Everything was flying. Each morning early, he dashed out to his new toy. Day after day a gusty wind kept him on the ground. Impatiently he confined himself to prosaic instructions about the engine, the manipulation of controls.

After a fortnight of high winds came a calm day. Houdini was out almost at dawn. He insisted on trying the machine. There was a whir of the engine, a bumping whirl across the field, then a sweeping lift into the ether,

and, almost as quickly, a flop back to earth. "I smashed machine," says a single line in the diary that day. "Broke propeller all to hell."

But that was only a beginning.

XV

FLYING-MACHINES were rarities when Houdini bought his Voisin plane in 1909. There were only about two dozen aviators in the entire world. No regular schools for flying existed, and no regular flying fields. The daring soul who purchased an airplane got some rudimentary instruction about the controls, hunted up some open space where he could practice, and tried to take the air. If he remained in the air for a minute or two and made a landing without breaking his neck, it was a successful flight.

Houdini had trouble finding a place to do his flying near Hamburg, but the German government finally granted him the use of a suburban parade ground on condition that he would instruct the regiment stationed there in the mysteries of the art. Houdini went to the field almost every morning for several weeks, but the weather was bad, and he had only two or three real flights. After his smash the machine was out of business for two weeks. He had many pictures taken with himself seated in the machine, with German army officers grouped around the plane, and these made excellent publicity material for Houdini the showman. In 1917 he destroyed all these photographs save the one reproduced here, which escaped his notice. "I taught those fellows to fly," he said to his wife, bitterly, "and they may have killed Americans." There is little doubt that he exaggerated the value of his instruction.

He was to leave for Australia at the beginning of 1910, and of course the plane had to be taken along. He spent a small fortune on spare parts, forty pounds for an extra chassis, and engaged Brassac, a French mechanic, to accompany him. The party sailed from Marseilles on January 7. "Hope all will be well with me and my machine," is the final entry in the diary.

During the voyage of twenty-nine days all was decidedly not well with Houdini. He was seasick virtually all the time, except during the brief interval of passing through the Suez Canal, or while the vessel was calling at various ports. As his wife was fond of dancing, he struggled into his evening clothes each night and made a pretense of seeking enjoyment. He had virtually no use for the clothes for dining, for he had only fourteen meals during the entire trip. When the boat reached Adelaide he had lost twenty-five pounds. On his second day ashore, he consumed six hearty meals and began to feel like a human being again. For the first time, however, newspaper men noted that his hair was sprinkled with gray.

He opened an eight-week engagement at Melbourne on February 7 and made a huge hit from the start. The first week's receipts were £1333. Press notices about the performer were columns long and almost lyrical with enthusiasm. A few of Houdini's spectacular water jumps contributed to the interest. One of his jumps in the Yarrow apparently disturbed a corpse. Shortly after Houdini vanished in the muddy water, the corpse floated to the surface. The big crowd of watchers did not know at

first whether or not this lifeless body was Houdini. A minute later Houdini came to the surface a few feet from the corpse. When he discovered his grewsome neighbor, he was so startled that he could not swim away. His attendants speedily hauled him into a boat.

All Houdini's spare time was spent with the airplane. At Digger's Rest, twenty miles from Melbourne, he found a suitable field. He had to deposit £154 with the customs' authorities to bring in his plane, and he paid £60 for a tent to be used as a hangar.

A Wright plane, imported by an Australian, was already installed on the field, its owner awaiting favorable weather for a flight. The two flying-machines were the first ever seen in Australia, and there was intense interest to see which aviator would make the first successful flight.

By February 24 the Voisin plane was assembled, but for a time the motor refused to work properly. Each morning at five o'clock Houdini motored out to the flying-field, and he remained there until it was time to dash back to the matinée. After his motor began to work properly, a period of gusty weather set in which made flying impossible. Planes were delicate birds in those days, and only highly skilled aviators dared venture from the earth save under a windless sky. By March 1 the Wright flyer, in desperation, tried a flight. His plane rose twelve feet and was hurled to the ground. That was the end of the rival machine.

Each day an expectant crowd assembled at the field, and Houdini insisted on playing host to every one. His wife

and her attendants were kept busy all day at the field distributing from hampers food which they had cooked the day before, and washing an endless succession of dishes.

After a time Houdini began driving out to the field at night and sleeping in the hangar with the plane. At the first streak of dawn he and the faithful Brassac would be out taking an anxious survey of the weather. Three weeks elapsed, however, before Brassac would permit Houdini to try his luck. That was March 18, and he made three flights, one of six minutes and thirty-seven seconds. A huge crowd cheered and wept and cheered again. "Never in any fear and never in any danger," reads the diary. "It is a wonderful thing." The Australians hailed it as marvelous. During the next few days, apparently every one who had not seen Houdini on the flying field attempted to get a glimpse of him at the theater. A hastily formed Aviation Society raised a round sum to present a trophy to him as the first successful aviator in Australia. Two days later, in order not to disappoint a Pathé photographer, Houdini flew two and a half minutes in a gusty wind, much to Brassac's dismay, while the man took pictures. "Blown about like a piece of paper on a windy day. Made a landing safe and sound."

He opened at Sydney, March 28. After a day spent visiting the grave of W. H. Davenport, the old-time spiritualist, and arranging to have it renovated, he devoted himself to the airplane with renewed ardor. A new flying-field was secured, and sometimes Houdini would get up as early as 2 A.M. to go out to his pet. He had

been taking lessons in driving a motor car too, but though he flew the plane alone, he was too absent-minded to drive the car without a chauffeur at his elbow. He made four flights at Sydney, one of them in a gale of wind.

When his engagement closed, at the beginning of May, he was a wreck for lack of sleep. "It is time I had the biplane packed, or it would have given me nervous prostration," he confides to his diary. "Have not had much sleep for two months, and now I seem to have lost the habit." He took the biplane with him, when he sailed for Vancouver, May 11, but he never flew again. In the fall he tried to sell it, but without success. The cost of this brief hobby must have been rather high, including carting a skilled mechanic halfway around the world. All in all, Houdini had flown about twenty times, spending possibly an hour in the air.

Incidentally he never drove a motor car again. He could fly, because flying absorbed him, but driving a motor car was such a prosaic thing that he could not keep his mind on it. He would notice a poster or a peculiar-looking ash-can or an old graveyard or a street fight—anything that enlisted his interest—and go careening ahead oblivious of the car and the traffic. No one save a paid chauffeur dared drive in the same car with him.

The trip to Vancouver, British Columbia, was smoother and easier than the voyage out to Australia. Houdini was sick only part of the time. He was able to give a show on board, and several times he took part in sports. On

one occasion the diary states that he won three first prizes. "Skipped the rope 439 times."

When the vessel touched at Suva, in the Fiji Islands, the passengers were greatly interested in the native swimmers who would dive in the shark-infested waters for coins and bring them up in their mouths. Houdini at once saw through the simple trick. The divers really caught the coins in their hands, he said, and placed them in the mouth before coming to the surface. Some of the passengers disputed this, and to settle the matter Houdini suggested that he and the best native swimmer be handcuffed and dive after separate coins. He made a wager that the native would not stand the test successfully.

The captain quickly interposed. The sharks, he declared, would not touch the dusky natives, but Houdini would be in great danger. The man-eaters, it appeared, preferred blonds.

Houdini insisted on the trial, but all the islanders refused to be handcuffed. Finally one consented to have his hands tied with a bit of rope. This was done, Houdini had his hands manacled behind him, and the two coins were tossed overboard.

The native was over after his coin in a flash, before Houdini was even set for his spring. A full minute passed after the men vanished in the water; then the native came up, gasping for breath, with his hands still tied and no coin in his mouth. Fifteen seconds later Houdini popped into view, feet first. He was still manacled, but both coins were in his mouth.

Later he explained his secret to the passengers. "I tricked you, just as the natives do," he said. "It is virtually impossible to catch in the mouth a coin falling through the water. As soon as I dove I released one hand and easily seized my coin. Then I followed the native, who was vainly trying to catch his coin with his mouth. When he finally gave up and started toward the surface, I grabbed his coin also. By that time I was down so deep that I feared my eardrums would burst from the pressure, so I started up hastily, feet first, without trying to reverse my position. As I neared the surface I placed the coins in my mouth and snapped the handcuff on again."

Houdini was back home in time for his mother's sixty-ninth birthday in mid-July. During the summer he made two pilgrimages, one to visit Ira E. Davenport, the spiritualist, at his home in Chatauqua County, New York, the other out to Wisconsin to see the Flitcrofts. Davenport was an old man, dying of cancer of the throat. The Flitcrofts, too, he found infirm with age, and Mr. Flitcroft was losing his sight.

Houdini sailed on the *Mauretania* August 10 to resume his tour in England. The trip was unusually smooth, and Houdini was not ill all the time. For the third day out the diary has this entry: "Had concert at 8:30 P.M. I did thirty-five minutes of magic. . . . Had my pants pressed, cost fifty cents."

For the next nine months Houdini moved from city to city in England. He was already almost an institution

in that country, and he easily repeated his earlier successes.

To Britons with a mechanical twist, Houdini had now become a standing challenge. They were constantly coming forward with new devices of restraint to be tested against him. He took them all on and beat them, but seemingly he could not allay their delight in the game or their optimism about catching him in the next test. Most of his feats of escape were now performed in full view of the audiences, and naturally that helped the sport. Only when he was boarded up in a chest or cask did he have the encasement moved out of sight behind the curtains of his "ghost cabinet," and he arranged his concealment in such a way that spectators were assured he had no hidden confederates. In fact, never in any of his escapes did Houdini employ confederates.

At Chatham, on the town square, he was strapped and chained to a cannon to which a fifteen-minute time fuse was attached. He wriggled free in six minutes and drew the fuse. The public authorities as well as most of the spectators were greatly concerned over the destructive possibilities of this test, but as it was later discovered that the challenger had put no charge in the cannon, there was no real danger.

At Shepherd's Bush he was coopered in a rum-punch barrel—empty—and he was out in forty seconds, leaving the barrel intact. At Liverpool a crew of tarpaulin makers tied him in a seabag of heavy sailcloth which had been treated with oil and tar. At Harlesden an ingenious con-

tractor appeared with a novel plan to hold Houdini. First he laced together three stout building ladders to form a tripod. Houdini's neck was roped and tied to the top rungs. His feet were secured to the floor by an iron staple. His elbows were bent over an iron bar fastened behind his back and his wrists drawn forward over the bar and handcuffed. Houdini got himself out in less time than it had taken to lash and lock him in this complicated apparatus.

At Leeds, for the first time in his career Houdini had to call for help. He had accepted the challenge of a Yorkshire brewer to escape from the water-can filled with ale. Houdini was a teetotaler, and the fumes of the ale in the closed can soon stupefied him. By sheer will power, he managed to get part way out of the can, but was slipping back when he attracted the attention of one of his assistants, who entered the cabinet and hauled him out. The audience never knew how near the performer had come to drowning.

By this time Houdini had developed a high sense of professional responsibility. In his diary and in occasional public actions can be found intimations of the spirit which during the last years of his life inspired him to devote most of his time to crusades against fraud and sham, particularly as they involved his own calling.

For some time a rather sharp practice had been growing among British managers. In order to save salaries, they would leave off one or more of their top-line performers at matinées, even though the acts were billed to appear.

The performers, of course, got no money for these non-appearances, while the audiences generally inferred that the players were too lazy or proud to do their turn for an afternoon house. The Variety Artists' Federation took a case into court to test the right of the managers to omit a player from afternoon performances, but the judgment was in favor of the managers. After that apparently the abuse was permitted to go on by default.

Houdini decided to tackle it single-handed. While playing at the Holborn Empire, London, his opportunity came. On Wednesday evening he received word from the manager that his services were not required for the Thursday matinée. Houdini replied in writing that he agreed to that arrangement. On Thursday, however, at matinée time, he observed that his name still topped the bills in front of the hall. Houdini then sought out the manager and told him that since no notice had been given to the public that he was not to appear, he ought to be allowed to perform. The manager refused the request.

Between two acts of the afternoon performance, Houdini stepped in front of the curtain, stopped the orchestra, and in a brief speech explained the situation. He added that in his opinion, patrons who had come particularly to see him were entitled, under the circumstances, to request that their money be returned.

A little later the manager appeared on the stage and attempted to explain away Houdini's argument, but the audience booed him heartily. Moreover, at the conclusion of the show, the whole audience refused to leave until the

management distributed tickets good for another performance during the week.

Thereafter Houdini was never again requested to omit a matinée. Moreover, his position was such that the resultant publicity dealt virtually a death blow to the practice, and managers who subsequently attempted to cut off a few acts from their shows as advertised discovered that their audiences would no longer submit quietly to such curtailments. Houdini's demonstration was a triumph, if not for law'n'order, at least for fair play, and it endeared him to his fellow players.

Shortly before the conclusion of his tour, Houdini was saddened by the tragic death of his friendly rival Lafayette, who lost his life in a fire that consumed the Empire Theater in Edinburgh.

Lafayette was a highly successful performer, chiefly because of his wonderful showmanship, for he was neither a great illusionist nor a great conjurer. He and Houdini were old friends. Houdini had given Lafayette, some years before, a black mongrel dog, called Beauty, which became Lafayette's constant companion. The magician had a special bathroom built in his home for Beauty, and the dog, seated on a satin cushion, had all its meals served by a uniformed waiter, who brought them in, course by course. When the dog died, in May, 1911, Lafayette was incolsolable. He had the body embalmed, and when the authorities in Edinburgh refused permission to bury the dog in the cemetery, he bought a special vault for himself in order to place the dog there.

Before this could be done came the fire in the theater. Lafayette had not intended to appear that night, but he finally consented on the urgent appeal of Charles Fountain, the manager. The fire was one of those quick backstage affairs more frequent in the sort of construction in vogue twenty years ago than they are today. Fountain subsequently told Houdini that he and Lafayette stood alone on the stage as Fountain pulled the handle to lower the fire curtain. Above them, the flies were a raging furnace.

"Come on, let's get out!" cried Fountain, as the heavy curtain came down, and before it reached the floor he ducked in front of it. Lafayette refused to follow.

His body was recovered and cremated, as he had requested, and his ashes placed between the paws of Beauty. Houdini, in his usual large fashion, sent to Edinburgh a huge piece, composed of thousands of flowers, modeled to represent the head and throat of Lafayette's canine companion.

XVI

HOUDINI enlarged his repertoire during the season of 1911-12, touring American cities in the East. He carried two thousand pounds of baggage on the trip. Since on the stage he relied largely on the strait-jacket, the can escape, and challenges, the huge weight of impedimenta seemed excessive. No inconsiderable part of it consisted of reference volumes and manuscripts. He was already planning two new books and carried a formidable library about the country with him. His wife persistently tried to reduce the volume of baggage, but always in vain.

During his engagement in Boston in the fall, Houdini was attracted by newspaper accounts of a strange sea-monster, a sort of crossbreed of whale and octopus, that had been brought ashore by some Cape Cod fishermen. He arranged to enter the body of the beast, handcuffed, and to be sewed within this strange prison, with the idea of escaping while the monster was submerged.

Preparatory to this Jonah-like performance the carcass was sterilized with chemicals, but after Houdini had been lowered into the water in this dark, meaty dungeon, a rush of acrid fumes made him sick and dizzy. Choking and in a panic, he tried to kick his way out of the beast. His exertions caused the huge carcass to roll over, and he narrowly escaped being crushed to death. Fortunately the change of position led his assistants to believe that he was giving signals of distress, and they started to haul up the

carcass. By that time Houdini recovered his presence of mind, got free of his shackles, and slipped out of the submarine prison before it reached the surface, leaving no trace of his egress.

Two nights later, on the stage, he permitted hospital attendants to bind him on a cot with sheets and bandages until he looked like a mummy, and then pour a dozen buckets of water over the cloths. Though this "wet sheet escape" was physically his most difficult feat, he had learned to dramatize it only after years of effort. "The audience never knows whether the stunt is hard or easy," he once wrote in his diary, after he had wrenched every muscle of his body in struggling out of a tangle of soaked sheets, to be greeted with only mild applause. Now, with a few additions to his patter, a few deft touches of showmanship, he made the crowds rise to his skill as he struggled with the clinging bonds. Thereafter, at intervals, he added the feat to his programs.

Though he was only thirty-seven, there were signs that his over-strenuous daily routine was already beginning to take its toll. While playing in Europe early in 1911 he was compelled to undergo a minor operation for an abscess that had developed on his body from his daily struggles to escape from strait-jackets. In October, while playing in Detroit, he was troubled with sharp pains in the groin and began passing blood. He continued his tour, however. Three weeks later, in Pittsburgh, his condition became so much worse that he was persuaded to consult a physician.

Dr. Wholly of Mercy Hospital informed Houdini that he had ruptured a blood vessel in one of his kidneys. He bluntly told his patient that he must take a complete rest for several months and thereafter must abandon entirely the strait-jacket escapes, wet sheet tests, and all other stunts involving bodily strain.

"It is my duty to inform you that by continuing your present regimen you would be committing suicide," said the physician. "You must reconcile yourself to the fact that your strenuous days are over."

Houdini laughed at him. "How long do you give me?" he asked.

"If you continue as at present, you will be dead within a year," replied the doctor.

"You don't know me," Houdini shot back.

He said nothing to his wife or his mother—they were both with him in Pittsburgh—about the doctor's grave warning. He did not even confide it to his diary. When his mother insisted that he was badly hurt, he lied to her blithely. In great pain, he rounded out his three remaining days of performing in Pittsburgh, and then, having canceled his engagements for the next fortnight, went home to New York to rest. For the two weeks he lay on a couch in his library directing the sorting-over of the latest additions to his collections. This was his brief concession to the sentence of death.

On the first Monday in December, he was back at work at Keith's Theater, Columbus, Ohio. On the first night he escaped from a packing-case, from a rotary-lock mail

pouch, and from a cask filled with beer provided by a local brewer. As the week wore on, he suffered great discomfort. "Think I started work too soon," reads the diary. "Wish I had laid off another week."

None the less he went right on escaping from ingenious restraints day after day. Early in 1912 he tore a ligament in his side in the course of a wet sheet test, and thereafter for a period continued his performances in much pain and distress. The injured kidney did not heal for some years, probably because he never gave it a real opportunity, and frequently he complains in his diary of having pain from it. Thereafter he always slept with a pillow under his side, to protect his kidney region from pressure. He also wore a black silk bandage over his eyes, as the least ray of light would awaken him.

Houdini kept the Pittsburgh physician in mind, and at the end of a year sent him some photographs showing his current escapes from strait-jackets and the like, with the cheerful message, "Still alive and going strong." For fifteen years, in fact, Dr. Wholly continued to receive occasional mementos of the strenuous pursuits of the man he had sentenced to rest, on penalty of death, in the fall of 1911.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1912, Houdini was preparing even more difficult feats, of which he saved the principal one for New York during a long engagement at Hammerstein's roof in July and August, 1912. In New York, Houdini could always fill a theater, but the newspapers still refused to accept him as wholeheartedly as did

those of other American cities and most European capitals. They still treated his spectacular stunts with cynicism and reserve.

When Houdini announced early in July that he would try to escape from a packing-box, weighted and tossed into the harbor from an East River pier, the papers noted his "defi" warily. They did, however, send reporters to cover the story. They found Houdini with a stout-looking packing-box weighted with two hundred pounds of lead, and with an assortment of regulation handcuffs and leg-irons in which the performer invited the newspaper men to fasten his wrists and legs before he was nailed in the case. They also discovered a squad of policemen who informed Houdini that no one was permitted to commit suicide from a pier and he must gather up his box and his cuffs and clear out.

Houdini then hailed a tug, and, inviting all the newspaper and camera men aboard, steamed out into the harbor, much to the disappointment of the general public assembled along the water front. One persistent newsboy dived off the pier and struck out after the tug. He was hauled aboard and permitted to stay.

The skeptical reporters presently found themselves, against their better judgment, taking the affair seriously. They were enlisted to put the irons on Houdini. Then he insisted that they superintend the nailing up of the box. After the cover was hammered down, a steel band was fastened about the box for good measure. Then it was roped and allowed to slide down a chute into the waters

of the bay, where it floated almost wholly submerged at the end of one hundred feet of line.

At the end of fifty-seven seconds, there was a splash beside the box, and Houdini bobbed into view. He swam to the tug, and the box was hauled in after him. It was intact. The nails and the steel bands were still in place. The cover was then pried off and there at the bottom lay the handcuffs and leg-irons. Their locks had been sprung open, and they were in good working order.

That was news, even in New York, and thereafter the press of the metropolis took Houdini seriously. A fortnight later, when the manager of a skyscraper then in construction had Houdini roped hand and foot on a narrow scantling twenty stories above the street and Houdini wriggled out of a maze of clove hitches, Flemish loops, and hangman's knots on that dizzy perch, the feat received respectful attention from the newspapers.

One incident of Houdini's long run at Hammerstein's escaped the attention of the press at the time.

Houdini's weekly salary was a thousand dollars, the best money he had made up to that time in the United States. At the end of his first week, he asked that the sum be paid him in gold. William Hammerstein, after some chaffing, acceded to the odd request, and Houdini departed with a heavy bag of coins. He drove straight home with it and dashed into his mother's room.

"Mother, Mother, do you remember the promise I made Father years ago that I would always look after

you?" he cried. "Look what I am able to bring you now! Hold out your apron!"

With that he poured the gold in a glittering stream into her lap.

Houdini always described this incident as the greatest thrill of his life. Probably he did not exaggerate. It was both good sentiment and good theater, and Houdini reveled in both.

He clinched the conquest of New York a year later, when he came all the way from Bucharest to open Hammerstein's roof garden for a second season. The famous convict ship, *Success*, dating from the eighteenth century, which had been raised from the bottom of Sydney harbor and was making a tour around the world, happened to be in New York at this time. All New York was flocking to view this gruesome relic. Of course Mr. Hammerstein's press agent suggested to the captain that he challenge Houdini to escape from one of the ancient teakwood cells with their doors six inches thick, and as a result the captain and Houdini exchanged some alluring defiances by radio while Houdini was still on the ocean. The log of the old vessel, according to the captain, showed that she had never lost a prisoner. In New York harbor, not many minutes after the captain had chained Houdini to ringbolts in a cell below the water line, this record was broken. Houdini got out, dove through an upper porthole, and swam about until he was picked up. The massive door was left locked behind him.

At the roof garden, Houdini treated his audiences to an

improved version of his water-can trick, which he had been perfecting in Europe. Two imitators had appeared, one in Europe and one in Australia, and as early as 1910 Houdini determined to devise a trick which no one would have the temerity or the natural agility to undertake after him. He had drawn up plan after plan and practiced incessantly. Now, after three years of work, the thing was done. It looked simple enough. The can, filled with water, was placed in an iron-bound wooden chest, and into this doubly-sealed prison Houdini was lowered, head downward, his ankles encased in a thick board, like a man in the stocks. The lid was then clamped down and fastened with padlocks, which any member of the audience was permitted to furnish if he suspected Houdini's locks. The trick was spectacularly effective and offered little encouragement to the kind of performers who live by cleverly picking up the devices of others. Several years more were to elapse before the trick finally evolved into Houdini's Water Torture Cell, in which the walls were of glass so that the spectators could watch every stage of the incarceration and see the performer hanging head downward in the water.

The engagement at Hammerstein's lasted only two weeks. Then came a brief three weeks of vacation. He sailed on the *Kronprinzessin Cecilie* July 8 to continue his European engagements. He was booked to open at Copenhagen in ten days.

Persons at the pier beheld a curious sight. They saw Houdini clinging to a little old woman in black silk, em-

bracing and kissing her, saying good-by and going up the gangplank, only to return to embrace her again. "*Ehrich, vielleicht wenn du zurück kommst bin ich nicht hier*" (perhaps when you come back I shall not be here), his mother remarked as they reached the pier together. She was seventy-two and no longer felt any certainty about time. Houdini apparently could not leave off reassuring her and showing his affection for her. Finally she had to order him to go. Houdini, turning to the bystanders, said: "Look, my mother drives me away from her."

"No, no," protested his mother, "but you must leave now. Go quickly, and come back safe to me."

He was the last person aboard, leaping up the gangplank just before it was drawn up. The last he saw of his mother, she had caught one of the paper streamers he had thrown, and he was leaning far over the rail holding the other end.

They cabled to him at Hamburg that his mother had suffered a paralytic stroke and was not expected to live, but he had already moved on to Copenhagen, and the message did not catch up with him for several days. It was handed to him by one of his assistants as he entered the theater. He immediately returned to his hotel like a man in a trance. His wife found him incapable of thought or action. She hastily packed some of their clothing, and they took a train back to Germany, leaving Houdini's first broken contract behind him.

In Denmark, breach of contract is a criminal offense. The police arrested one of Houdini's assistants, whom

they took for the performer, and this retainer stayed in jail until explanations could be made. Meanwhile the Houdinis managed to catch for the return trip the same vessel on which they had sailed from the States; but Mother Weiss died before they sailed.

The diary:

"*July 29.* Arrived back in America. We land and go right up to house, walk into parlor where our Beloved Mother is sleeping in her last bed. . . . Mother always said, '*Giebt's nicht, nur Mann und Frau*' (nothing matters but man and wife), and at last she is resting with the one who loved her best of all.

"*July 30.* This day Cecilia Weiss, *geboren* Steiner, my darling Mother, was laid to rest alongside of her husband and my father. (As we stood on the deck, July 8, Mother asked me to bring back a pair of the warm woolen house slippers and she said, '*Nicht vergess' nummer 6.*' In Bremen I bought the slippers on our return journey and they were placed with her when she was laid to rest.)"

Thereafter for a month, for the first time in nearly thirty years, his work was completely forgotten. He made almost daily visits to the graveyard. His whole existence seemed to center round that fresh mound of earth. It was the end of August before he could be persuaded to sail to resume his work in Europe.

The diary:

"*Sept. 15.* Getting my Sainted Mother's letters ready to have transcribed so I can put them in book form."

"*Sept. 16.* Opened at Apollo Theater, Nuremberg, did

needles act as opening and closed with Torture Cell. Act works beautifully. Had a terrible spell after show on account of my Darling Mother."

"*Sept. 23*. Am having Darling Mother's letters written in good German on typewriter so that I can read them easily. Many a bitter tear I am shedding. In the entire lot of letters, which I have saved since 1900, each is a love story, a prayer to God to protect her children, a plea that we should be good human beings."

For many months Houdini was moody and distracted. For the first time in his life he seemed to lose interest in his work, and also in his manifold collections and his professional contacts. He neglected his diary, and the notes for the remainder of 1913 are scattered and sketchy, with an undercurrent of morbid preoccupation. He spent considerable time composing encomiums of his mother. Some of these he had printed, so that he could send copies to his friends. He composed them in the intervals of his work and of attending to several annoying lawsuits he was conducting against the German police, who insisted on arresting him for jumping manacled into their rivers.

"This mother," he wrote, "to whom Eternity means no more than a fleeting, forgotten second of Time, when working or watching for her children, you must cherish while she is with you so that, when the pitiless Reaper brings from the Almighty the Mandate recalling Mother, you may receive from your ever-present Conscience the consolation coming from the knowledge that you tried to smooth, tried to remove the briers from the path which

she trod through this Mortal Valley of the shadow of Death.

"The poet who wrote 'God Himself could not be Everywhere so He made Mothers'—gives poetic utterance to my own sentiment."

On November 1, opening at the Alhambra Theater, Paris, for a month, he writes in the diary: "Am doing needle trick and U.S.D. [upside down, his own term for the can trick]. Doing very big. Am very melancholy." During the whole month he met only a single challenge, a most unusual thing for him. By November 29, the diary states: "Am feeling a bit better, but July 17 is always in my mind."

During most of December he rested, and for a time he took his wife to Monte Carlo. After his arrival he went to the gaming-tables, expecting that it would divert him to lose some money. On his first visit he won five hundred francs, on the second fifteen hundred. The experience bored him. Apparently the only place that really interested him in Monte Carlo was the suicides' graveyard, to which he paid several visits. It is the only place described in detail in the diary during this period.

The entry for Sunday, December 8, contains the following:

"Dismal day. Visited graveyard where all suicides are buried. Persons who have lost all their money and then committed suicide. A terrible feeling pervades the first time one sees the graves, and thinks of the human beings who finish their lives in this manner.

"More suicides in winter than in summer. Casino now pays return fares of losers, makes them sign papers, etc., and even ships bodies to their home towns to keep things quiet. When a body is found, money is stuffed in the pockets to cause the belief that money affairs did not cause the deed.

"Suicides are buried for seven years, then dug up, placed in boxes and saved in this manner for future reference in case relatives wish to take bodies away. . . .

"Saw grave of man and wife who committed suicide together."

For many months thereafter lamentations about his mother's death bob up at intervals in the diary. Typical is the entry of November 22, 1914: "Arrived from Boston 7 A.M. . . . After dinner I go alone to Cypress Hills and visit the family plot. Bleak and windy. It is sixteen months and five days since Mother went to sleep. I certainly feel lonely."

For the rest of his life, whenever he left New York on a tour, his last act was to visit his mother's grave. He would lie there face downward and tell her of all his plans, as if she could really hear him. When he returned from the tour, he would usually have himself driven from the station to the cemetery and repeat his tender confidences, relating the details of his trip. On the anniversaries of his mother's death and of her birthday, if he were in New York, he would usually visit the grave, not infrequently at midnight or at daybreak. A typical birthday anniversary in the diary reads: "Square wreath with

seventy-two lilies for My Beloved Mother's resting place. I will get up early tomorrow to take them out." The word "mother" in the diary is almost invariably printed in capitals.

During the last ten years of the diary, references to Houdini's mother are less frequent. In his last complete diary, covering the year 1925, on the anniversary of his mother's death, Houdini pasted in the page a copy of Masefield's poem to his mother:

> In the dark womb where I began
> My mother's life made me a man.
> Through all the months of human birth
> Her beauty fed my common earth.
> I cannot see, nor breathe, nor stir,
> But through the death of some of her.

According to Mrs. Houdini, her husband was never quite the same after his mother's death. Something of the youthful quality went out of him, something of his earlier joyousness. It had been no absentee admiration that he gave his mother; she was his most intimate friend. Her passing left a gap in his life that gave him an acute sense of loss to the end.

For a long period, covering several years, he would find himself at intervals standing on the edge of a void across which his mother had vanished into the darkness. His frequent visits to her grave and his long outpourings there were a sort of groping after her. From his early years he had an almost morbid curiosity about what he liked to call the Great Mystery, and he was always making

pacts with friends whereby, if one of them died, he was to attempt to communicate with the other. He had such a pact with Lafayette, one with John Sargent, his associate and librarian, one with his wife. He attempted seriously, over a period of years, by every means that offered, to pierce the veil and get into communication with his mother. His impulsion, the nature of his attempts, their failure, and his subsequent disillusionment transformed him, in his later years, into a stern crusader against quackery and fraud.

Houdini's adult life is divided into two periods. His mother's death marks the cleavage.

XVII

At the beginning of 1914, Houdini was touring England and Scotland, somewhat recovered in spirits. He presided, before a distinguished company, at the first annual dinner of the Magicians' Club of London, which he had founded with Will Goldston the year before. Houdini was the center of the event, and he enjoyed it. Among the guests was Horatio Bottomley, editor of *John Bull,* who declared that he would not leave the hall until he had learned Houdini's secrets, as he might need them to escape from jail some day. Mr. Bottomley spoke in jest, but he proved a true prophet. After a career of windy jingoism during the war, he was convicted and sentenced to five years in jail for misappropriating funds.

Houdini's diary of April 14, 1914, dated in Edinburgh, notes: "I am forty years of age today. Alas, my Darling Mother not here with us to wish me birthday greetings." He was doing his burned turban trick, the needles, and the torture cell.

A week after his birthday, he shifted to an entirely new show, consisting of magic and illusions, which he called "The Magical Revue." For the first time in his career his program resembled those of the orthodox conjurers and illusionists. Some of his effects were entitled "The Crystal Casket," "Good-by Winter," "The Rain of Gold," "Arrival of Summer," "Calico Conjuring," "Metamorphosis." Houdini loved magic, and he found

the Revue a pleasant and easy interlude between his more strenuous stunts. He took great pride in the fact that his wife worked with him on the stage in the Revue, after several years during which she had been merely a helper and adviser: "Bess working as though she had never retired," reads a note in the diary early in the spring. A few weeks later comes this entry: "Best show I ever presented. Bess works magnificently."

The latter part of June found him sailing for home on the *Imperator* with former President Roosevelt as a fellow passenger. Though neither knew it, it was Roosevelt's last visit to Europe, and it was to be Houdini's last trip until 1920. In a sense, during the interim, the world was to be remodeled by the sword.

Theodore Roosevelt and Houdini had many qualities in common. Both were daring, impetuous, strenuous characters. Both were temperate livers and home-lovers. Both were consummate showmen. They struck up a friendship on board, and they enjoyed taking their morning exercises together—if Houdini was well enough to appear at all.

One morning while Houdini was walking with Roosevelt, one of the ship's officers asked if he would give a performance at the concert the next night.

"Go ahead, Houdini!" Roosevelt exclaimed eagerly. "Give us a little séance." (They had been talking about spiritualism.)

In the evening Houdini began with some card sleights in which Roosevelt was allowed to select the cards. "I

was amazed," said Houdini, "at the way he watched every one of the misdirection moves as I manipulated the cards. It was difficult to baffle him."

Then came the slate writing by "spirits." This is a stand-by of the mediums. The spectator writes a question, which he conceals from the operator, on a slip of paper. The paper is inclosed between two blank slates, tied together, between which a stub of pencil is usually inserted on which the "spirits" may write.

Roosevelt took great pains to see that Houdini had no opportunity to read his question. With his back turned to the conjurer he wrote, "Where was I last Christmas?" He folded his paper carefully, sealed it in an envelope, and placed it between the slates himself. When they were subsequently opened, one slate revealed a map of the South American wilderness explored by Colonel Roosevelt the previous year, including the country of the River of Doubt, with a pointing arrow to which was affixed the legend, "Near the Andes." Roosevelt's whole itinerary, which had not been published up to that time, was outlined on the map. The slate bore the signature of W. T. Stead, the English editor and ardent spiritualist, who had been lost on the *Titanic* in 1912.

As Roosevelt had spent the previous Christmas in exactly the location named, he was astounded at the result obtained. In the morning as soon as he saw Houdini, he exclaimed: "How did you do it last night? Was that real spiritualism?"

Houdini grinned. "It was just hocus-pocus," he replied, but he would give no further explanation.

As a matter of fact, the trick was partly the result of clever preparation, partly a lucky coincidence. In one of the autobiographical fragments Houdini left behind, he gave a complete elucidation. Here is his story:

"When I went to the Hamburg-American Steamship Company to get my tickets, the man at the desk whispered in my ear, 'Teddy Roosevelt is on the boat, but don't tell any one.' As I walked out I began to think what I could do with the information. I always give extemporaneous or impromptu performances on shipboard, and in fact I sometimes prepare two weeks ahead for an impromptu show.

"The *London Telegraph* was beginning to publish the Colonel's story of his trip in South America. I jumped into a taxi and went to the *Telegraph* office to see what I could pick up. Some of my editorial friends came forward with various inside information, and I obtained a map of the trip, as yet unpublished. Then I prepared my slates and was ready for the séance. I found it easy to work the Colonel into a state of mind so that the suggestion of the séance would come from him.

"On the night of the séance I asked the passengers generally to write questions. Then one question was to be selected by some one from half a dozen placed in a hat. I had secretly prepared half a dozen of my own, and of course I intended to see that only my envelopes went into the hat. They all contained the same question. 'Where

was I last Christmas?' That was the question I wanted to answer for the Colonel, and by a strange coincidence he asked exactly that question. I suppose I tried to suggest it by hints of indirection, but there was no telepathy or thought transference involved.

"Here is how I got his message. The morning of the séance I noticed two books on a table in the salon. I took them into my stateroom, and with a razor blade I cut alongside the edges of the cover of each and lifted up the outer cloth binding. Below this I inserted a sheet of white paper and on top of this a carbon sheet. Then I carefully glued the cloth binding on the cover, as it had been. I then replaced the books in the salon.

"At the séance I handed the Colonel a pencil and a piece of paper to write his question. As he started to write, with the paper in the palm of his hand, I exclaimed, 'I beg your pardon, Colonel,' and reached over and handed him one of the prepared books to rest his paper on.

"Victor Herbert, who was standing near, said, 'Turn around. Don't let him see it. He will read the question by the movements of the top of the pencil.' The Colonel then faced abruptly away from me and scribbled his question in such a position that I could not see him do it. Of course that made no difference to me. After he had sealed the question in an envelope, I reached over and took the book from him, apparently to replace it on the table. As I did so, with my back to the audience, I tore the cover and peeked at the question. By a lucky chance it proved to be exactly the question I had prepared for.

"Knowing what was in the Colonel's envelope, I did not have to resort to sleight of hand, but boldly asked him to place his question between the slates himself, as I held them in the air. While I pretended to show all four faces of the two slates, by manipulation I showed only three. My 'message' from W. T. Stead was already on one slate as I tied the two of them face together. The Stead signature was copied from that on a number of his letters which I had picked up in London.

"It can be readily seen why the Colonel was willing to believe that I possessed the power of drawing communications from spirits, whereas I was simply resorting to a material experiment, in which, as it turned out, blind chance played a large part."

The story of Houdini's astounding demonstration was of course sent by radio to the news associations, and gave him a flying start when he opened his third successive season on Hammerstein's roof in New York on July 9. By this time the metropolis had taken him to its bosom, and he was welcomed as a favorite son. He repaid the welcome in good measure. Again he had himself flung into the harbor, securely handcuffed and nailed in a packing-box. A few days later he repeated the stunt, with the variation of having himself sewed into a linen bag, instead of being handcuffed, before he was nailed in the chest. He escaped under water, leaving both bag and chest intact. Shortly afterward he repeated his handcuff and box escape in the ocean off Sandy Hook. Each night, in addi-

1915

DARING DIVE!

This Wednesday, July 15

12:30 P. M. SHARP

BATTERY, NEAR THE AQUARIUM

HARRY

HOUDINI

Now Appearing at Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre and Roof Garden

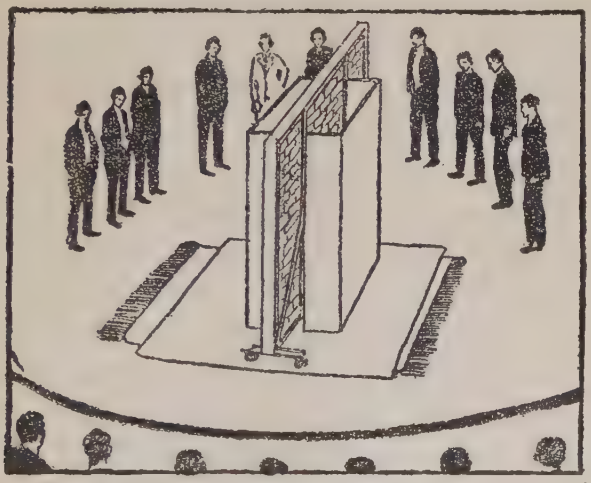
Securely handcuffed and leg ironed will be placed in a heavy packing case, which will be nailed and roped, then encircled by steel bands, firmly nailed. Two hundred pounds of iron weights will then be lashed to this box containing HOUDINI. The box will then be THROWN INTO THE RIVER. Houdini will undertake to release himself whilst submerged under water.

The Most Marvelous Feat Ever Attempted in This or Any Other Age.

Wednesday, Rain or Shine

tion, he performed the same under-water stunt in the big tank at the roof garden.

He had also brought to New York an entirely new trick which won instant admiration. This was his stunt of "walking through a brick wall." The night before his opening at Hammerstein's, he was working at the theater until 4 A.M. to perfect his arrangements for this novelty.



From the New York World

THE BRICK WALL TRICK

The brick wall, about ten feet high, was set on the stage from front to back. It was built on a steel beam resting on rollers about two inches high at either end, so that the whole thing could be moved away easily after the act. Beneath the wall, stretching several feet across the stage on either side, were two seamless rugs. Houdini, with a long white smock over his clothes, in which he looked even more than usual like an evangelistic clergy-

man, took his position in the center on one side of the wall. A small screen was placed about him. A similar screen was placed on the opposite side of the wall.

Houdini would wave his hands above the screen. "Here I am," he cried. The hands would vanish. "Now I'm going." Then in a few seconds: "Now I'm on the other side."

The screen which had hidden Houdini would be removed. He had vanished. Immediately the screen on the opposite side would be taken away, revealing Houdini smiling his serene smile.

New York was pretty thoroughly preoccupied at that time with certain startling developments in Europe, but it puzzled a bit over how Houdini got through that brick wall. Obviously he could not have crawled under the steel girder at the bottom. A cat could hardly have squeezed under that. He could not have slipped around either end of the wall or over it without being observed by the audience, to say nothing of the members of the volunteer committee from the audience solemnly standing about the wall in a semicircle at every performance. Beneath Houdini was the seamless rug, thoroughly pulled and pounded and examined by the committee before the trick began. It was an unusually stout, substantial rug. Houdini could not have slipped through that, through some trick flap, down a trap door, and up the other side. Also the wall itself was solid, made twice a day on the stage, before the eyes of the audience, of real bricks and mortar, with no possibility of any sliding panel or secret door. In fact, on

several occasions, challenging groups representing various bricklayers' unions were permitted to build the wall. Even such a veteran authority on magic as Dr. Saram R. Ellison, who could usually see through the most elaborate magical hocus-pocus at a first sitting, admitted that he could not see through the trick of the wall. "It's beyond me," declared Dr. Ellison, and other magicians who saw the trick seemed equally at sea. Yet the explanation, like that of most tricks, was astoundingly simple.

While he was mystifying and amusing New York, Houdini found time to attend a meeting of his old local of the neckwear cutters' union. It was his first visit in twenty-two years. "The best thing you ever did was to get out of the neckwear business," one of his old associates remarked. "The trade does not look so good to me," Houdini comments in the diary. "They are earning twenty-four dollars a week." At that time his weekly stipend was twelve hundred dollars. To Houdini's former fellow-craftsmen, doubtless, such an income seemed more of a miracle than slipping through a brick wall.

XVIII

DURING the years in which Europe was attempting to exterminate itself, Houdini perforce remained in the United States, and his name became familiar in the brightest lights on every White Way from coast to coast. He was in his forties, at a period when men are supposed to slow up physically; yet there seemed to be no limit to his daring and nerve-racking feats.

At the beginning of September, 1915, the people of Kansas City had their curiosity aroused by an announcement that Houdini, then playing at a local theater, was to be strapped in a strait-jacket by members of the city's detective bureau and then suspended head downward from the Kansas City *Post* building in Main Street. The detectives averred that neither Houdini nor any one else could escape in such a position from their vise-like contraption; Houdini predicted that he could. The police agreed to give him fifteen minutes for the test.

At noon on September 8th, "a crowd of five thousand persons," according to the *Post*, pressed about the building. Houdini and the detectives mounted a platform, and the crowd watched silently while the men from headquarters laced the performer in a substantial leather and canvas jacket, his arms pinioned in closed sleeves. Trussed up in this fashion, Houdini's heels were fastened to a block and tackle, and he was hoisted about thirty feet above the sidewalk.

Almost immediately the suspended body began a series of violent contortions. To the watching reporters, just below, it seemed as if the man had no bones, or as if each bone were flexible. In some fashion he secured play for his arms. As he twisted and wriggled, the tight cocoon of canvas and leather slipped jerkily downward toward his head. His rapid contortions made it resemble a bag overcrowded with snakes thrashing about in a death struggle. A few more wrenches, and the jacket hung free over his head. With a loose hand he flung it off and tossed it far into the crowd. Five thousand persons cheered wildly. Houdini, breathless and smiling, was lowered to the platform. "Two and a half minutes," said the chief of detectives. "I'd like to know how you did it." Houdini did not tell.

Thus a new feat was added to Houdini's repertoire. It was altogether novel, pleasantly hair-raising and uncanny, and at the same time quite intimate and real, good for loud cheers from thousands of throats in any city, and sure to make every person who saw it talk "Houdini, Houdini, Houdini" to his friends and neighbors for several days. Houdini performed the stunt at frequent intervals during the next eleven years, and it seemed to gain steadily in attractiveness. Those who saw it once were eager to come again next time Houdini visited their city and to bring their friends.

As time went on he devised variations. Sometimes he would have himself suspended high in the air from a skyscraper, instead of a few feet over the heads of the

crowd. On one occasion he made his escape in St. Paul in midwinter, the day after a blizzard, at a temperature of 20° below zero. He noted casually in his diary that it was cold. When he first did the trick in lower New York, the police reported that more pockets were picked than on any previous occasion. While thousands of persons were staring into the air, the light-fingered gentry reaped an easy harvest.

This was but one of a number of novelties undertaken by Houdini which made a press agent a superfluous animal.

At Salt Lake City, just after Christmas, 1915, Houdini permitted the Salt Lake Casket Company to screw him in a coffin and lock him in a steel burial vault. He slipped out in short order.

In Los Angeles some inventive challengers dared Houdini to let them bury him alive, manacled, under six feet of earth, to see if that would hold him. He made the condition that they first bury him one foot deep, then two, etc., so that he could work up gradually to the six-foot test. A place was selected near Santa Ana, where, as Houdini knew, the surface vegetation was merely bearded bristle on sandy soil. Houdini had no difficulty in breaking out of the shallower graves, but he had some trouble at the four-foot and five-foot levels. By that time the challengers were growing apprehensive, and some of them suggested that the tests had gone far enough. Houdini, however, insisted on proceeding. Accordingly the extra foot of soil was dug up, Houdini was manacled and

flopped in, and the six feet of soil was shoveled over his body.

It was then that the daredevil had a momentary lapse into panic that nearly cost him his life. Suddenly he awoke to the realization that he was in a real grave, the traditional six feet below the surface. All his life he had been unduly preoccupied with speculations on the mystery of death; he had constantly visited graveyards, and now his thoughts on these things crowded up morbidly into his mind. Suppose he couldn't get out? If he choked to death there in the close darkness, while his friends sat holding their watches above him—then what? Grewsome fancies paralyzed his initiative for some seconds when breath was exceedingly precious.

He pulled himself together and commenced to claw at the earth, following his procedure at the shallower interments, but presently his strength began to fail. Then he made another mistake. He tried to shout, merely wasting more precious breath and choking his mouth and nose with sand. Finally, more by instinct than reason, and almost unconsciously, he resumed his mole-like effort and at last burst through into the sunlight, completely exhausted.

That was a narrow escape. He had another, at a later date, also on the Coast, when he permitted himself to be manacled to a stake in the center of a ring of burning fagots. He had estimated that he could free himself in ninety seconds, before the fire became really dangerous. But some enthusiastic Boy Scouts had poured kerosene

over the fagots, and a breeze blew the smoke and flame into the face of the prisoner. Houdini never worked faster than he did in the ensuing minute in those choking fumes. His clothing was beginning to burn by the time he broke loose.

On various occasions Houdini was challenged to escape from safes of various sizes and makes, and he never failed to accept such offers. He would be duly locked inside and the combination set, and in two or three minutes the steel door would swing open and Houdini would jump out. His profound knowledge of locks was at the bottom of this apparent miracle. When he was locked in a safe he would have a small screwdriver concealed on his person. As soon as the door was closed, he would unscrew the cover over the locking apparatus. A safe is unlocked when the various numbers of the combination release severally a series of tumblers—there may be two or twenty tumblers—which free the catch. Houdini would manipulate the apparatus until all the tumblers fell. Then he would replace the cover over the apparatus and push the door open.

This process sounds absurdly simple, but in fact there are unpleasant possibilities of mischance. In a small safe there is not enough air space to provide a man with sufficient oxygen to endure very long. If the artist bungled his job and the locking apparatus became jammed, it would probably be necessary to dynamite the safe to free him. Houdini was aware of these chances. In his opinion, being locked in a safe was his most dangerous hazard.

Houdini's largest trick, at least in point of volume, was

making a five-ton elephant vanish. He performed this for a whole season at the New York Hippodrome in 1918, much to the delight of many thousand persons, including himself. Vanishing acts were no novelty, but none had been attempted on such a scale before. The mystery of the act was enhanced by the fact that below the stage was the huge Hippodrome tank filled with water, so that a trap-door escape was barred. The huge beast stepped into a cabinet, curtains were drawn behind him for a minute, and when they were flung open he was gone. Houdini was smilingly evasive about this trick. "Even the elephant does not know how it is done," was his reply to inquisitive persons. On the stage the trick took but a few minutes, but Houdini had worked over the construction of the cabinet many months.

During the same season at the Hippodrome, Houdini brought his needle trick to the highest stage of perfection. He appeared to swallow two hundred needles and one hundred and twenty feet of thread, drinking a glass of water "to wash them down." When he pulled the thread out of his mouth with the needles strung on it, it would be draped all the way across the great Hippodrome stage. Large delegations of surgeons came to inspect Houdini's mouth, as well as the thread and needles, but all were completely baffled by the trick. Their solemn findings, however, made fat publicity.

In the early days of the war period, December, 1915, in Los Angeles, Houdini had a curious encounter with Jess Willard, at that time the heavyweight boxing cham-

pion of the world and an authentic hero in his own right. The encounter made a profound impression on Houdini, and it echoed over the country in booming newspaper headlines for many days, much to the discomfiture of Mr. Willard.

The incident moved Houdini to write a full account to his sister Gladys. It is probably the longest letter of his career, more than a thousand words from a man who normally confined his correspondence to a few terse lines. In it, like a triumphant small boy, Houdini obviously reveled in the opportunity for a bit of showing off before his younger sister. He wrote:

"My dear sister Gladys—

"Well, at last I manage to sit down and relate to you how I defeated the World Champion Heavyweight Pugilist, Mr. Jess Willard, and why the newspapers gave me the decision over him, which makes me the Newspaper Heavyweight Champion of the World.

"As usual I called for my committee during the course of my performance, and only seven men responded, so I stepped to the footlights and made a neat little speech, which you know is one of my favorite pastimes. I said that I would be highly honored, and I thought the audience would likewise, if instead of three men, one who was equal to three would come up. 'I refer to Mr. Jess Willard, our champion, who, I hear, is in the house.'

"The audience applauded enthusiastically.

"I said: 'I assure you, Mr. Willard, that every one here

GOING TO SEE MR. HOUDINI FOR THE FIRST TIME (WE HAD IMAGINED HIM RESEMBLING JIM JEFFRIES OR JESS WILLARD) IMAGINE OUR SURPRISE WHEN WE FOUND HIM LOOKING A LITTLE BIT LIKE YSAYE, SENATOR VARDAMAN, BISHOP SOMEBODY, W. J. BRYAN, PADEREWSKI, DR. MUNYAN, SEVERAL FAMOUS CHATAUQUA FAVORITES A FEW OTHER STATESMEN AND A LOT MORE PROFESSIONAL CELEBRITIES.
INCIDENTALLY, WE'VE PUT HIM IN A BOX THAT HE CAN'T GET OUT OF.

From the Ohio State Journal, April 17, 1915

would like to have you as one of the committee, and to prove it to you, we will leave it to the audience. Those who are in favor of having Mr. Willard on the stage, please signify by applauding.'

"The audience applauded for four minutes.

"Willard glowered down upon me. He was seated in the loge, first balcony, with two other men. 'Hey, you, go on wid the show—but if you pay me what you pay those seven men who are on the stage, I'll come down.'

"The audience started in to hiss and boo him.

" 'All right,' I replied. 'I accept your challenge. Come right down and I'll pay you what I pay these seven men. Don't crawfish. Kindly step right downstairs and come on stage.'

"Audience applauds.

"Mr. Jess Willard half arose and was going to crush me forever, blurting out in his guttural voice, 'Go on wid the show, you faker, you four-flusher. Every one knows you're a four-flusher.'

"Hisses from the audience, and I walked right down to the footlights nearest his side, and thundered out at him, white with rage: 'Look here, you. I don't care how big you are or who you are. I paid you a compliment when I asked you to be one of the committee. You have the right to refuse, but you have no right to slur my reputation. Now that you have thrown down the gauntlet, I have the right to answer, and let me tell you one thing, and don't forget this, that I WILL BE HARRY HOUDINI

WHEN YOU ARE NOT THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD.'

"Well, my darling sister, I have roamed all over the world, I have raised Cain in thousands of theaters, I have tried through many a sleepless night to invent schemes to make an audience appreciate some worthy effort of mine, but nothing like this howling mob of refined ladies and gentlemen ever crossed my vision of success. . . . My reply to Mr. Jess Willard just set those twenty-three hundred human beings stark, raving mad. Instead of a place of entertainment, it was a seething, roaring furnace. For ten to fifteen minutes I had to stand perfectly still until the audience became exhausted in their tirade against Willard.

"All this time he shook his great fists at me and offered me a thousand dollars to come up to him, as he wished to annihilate me. But he could not make himself heard above the din of the hydra-throated monster he had aroused by insulting their compliments, and there he sat, swearing and blaspheming, until the head usher warned him that if he did not cease he must leave. Willard finally departed, crestfallen and defeated.

"As it was described in some of the papers, he was not only hissed out of the theater, but Houdini struck him a blow that knocked him out of the theater, knocked him down and out of the hearts of hundreds of thousands of his admirers.

"The next night Willard was to referee a boxing match, but he was not allowed to appear.

"Honest, Gladys, I have received at least a million dollars' advertising space from this fray. Some of the papers ran extras, and the affair was front-paged for four days, eight-column cuts, headlines, and my picture was prominent with Fighter Jeffries, who sided with me. . . . You will smile to know that I am greeted on the streets as 'Hello, Champion' and 'How is the Champion?'"

Houdini had no fear in defying the mammoth Willard, but after he had finished his act and turned toward the wings his nerve weakened at the idea of facing his diminutive wife. Houdini's hot temper not infrequently plunged him into difficulties, and for the moment he felt a pang of fear that he had again permitted himself to flare into a futile row which would earn him strong domestic disapproval. His state of mind is reflected in the letter:

"Bess was in the wings, her face flaming red. I felt sure she was going to give me the dickens, and just think of it—there I was hurling defiance at the greatest fighter of the human race, and when I beheld my beloved little helpmate I actually was afraid.

"But she was with me. In fact in all my fights when she thinks I am right she is alongside, helping me load the machine guns. So when I noted that Bess was not angry with me, I did not give a rap about what Willard thought of me."

A little more than a year later, a more decorous incident, in which Sarah Bernhardt was the second

party, brought Houdini another harvest of newspaper encomiums.

Bernhardt was touring the States. It was announced that a statuette of herself, cast in bronze, would be presented to the diva by "the actors and actresses of America." The presentation took place ceremoniously at a special matinée arranged at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. John Drew made an eloquent speech in his best manner, and Bernhardt graciously received the bronze along with an engraved scroll containing names of those prominent in the stage fraternity who were supposed to have been the donors. The occasion proved a dignified and delicate tribute to the French actress. Unfortunately, however, in the course of time, Bernhardt received a bill for three hundred and fifty dollars for the statue. The Gorham Company, which had cast the bronze, had been unable to collect elsewhere. The various principals of the festivity at the Metropolitan had severally disavowed any financial responsibility.

Bernhardt, puzzled and angry, sent both bill and statuette back to the Gorham Company, and the humiliating story slipped into the newspapers.

When Houdini read the story, he was greatly distressed. With characteristic impulsiveness he immediately sent a check for three hundred and fifty dollars to the Gorham Company and followed this with a telegram to Bernhardt asking if she would permit him to pay for the statue. Bernhardt gladly accepted the offer.

Within a fortnight Houdini had received from clipping

bureaus 3,756 newspaper clippings warmly commending his action and coupling his name with Bernhardt's. They averaged fifteen lines in length. A newspaper columnist, estimating the advertising at the pure reading-matter rate of a dollar a line, calculated that Houdini secured publicity worth $56,340 for an outlay of $350.

As soon as the United States entered the World War, Houdini began cutting down his engagements in order to give free performances for the soldiers at training camps and canteens and at benefit performances for war purposes. For two years he virtually devoted himself to this work, accepting all calls and traveling about, usually at his own expense. His lively imagination gave him an unflagging sympathy for the young men who were embarking to live in holes in the mud at a constant risk of being blown to bits or suffocated by poison gas. His favorite trick in his training-camp repertoire was his old stand-by "Money for Nothing," in which he would produce an incredible number of coins one by one out of thin air. Whenever he performed before men about to embark for Europe, he would snap a succession of five-dollar gold pieces out of the ether and present one to each of the soldiers. None of the beneficiaries got more of a thrill out of this generous bit of prestidigitation than the performer himself. In this entertaining fashion he gave away more than seven thousand dollars of his own money to the soldiers. Incidentally he sold a million dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds.

Houdini also sought in other ways to enlist his talents to

aid in the war. He devised an ingenious diving-suit from which the operator could escape under water without aid. It was pronounced by experts remarkably light and practical, and of unique value for under-water work under dangerous conditions. This invention he presented to the Navy Department. In return he received a formal bureaucratic letter of thanks. There is no evidence that any real effort was made to utilize the invention for naval purposes.

Toward the close of the war, Houdini plunged into motion pictures with the same all-absorbing enthusiasm he had displayed about airplanes ten years before. His motivation appeared to be twofold: first, the pictures offered a medium for preserving some of his principal feats for posterity; second, they seemed to offer an easy method of accumulating money for his later years.

Beginning in 1919 he did his first picture, "The Master Mystery," a serial, under contract with Octagon Films, Inc. Two others quickly followed. These were "The Grim Game" and "Terror Island," and the producing organization was the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation.

In the course of the filming, Houdini performed in dramatic fashion many of his most difficult escapes and daring feats and added several new hair-raising stunts for good measure. He scrambled over the edges of lofty cliffs, crawled down a perpendicular prison wall, leaped from one airplane to another in mid-air, dove into the water to rescue a girl who had been flung overboard locked in a safe. These risky feats and many others were all performed without subterfuge. Houdini went about his work

before the camera with the sober fidelity of a scholar storing up historical data.

As a result of his conscientious efforts, he sustained seven black eyes and a broken wrist during the filming of "The Master Mystery" alone. In "The Grim Game," while they were filming his airplane transfer, about four thousand feet in the air, the two planes crashed together and went hurtling to the earth. Luckily no one was killed. Houdini's plane fell into a swamp. His wife and his mechanic, Brassac, who were watching the incident from terra firma, jumped into a car and made a dash for him. When they pulled him out, he was half suffocated from being buried in mud, but otherwise he escaped injury.

Irwin Willat, the director, and the photographers, were in a third plane. They shot the whole episode. When they descended and found that they had a splendid print of the accident, the look of ghoulish triumph on their faces —and on Houdini's—made Mrs. Houdini resolve that if she could get her husband out of that line of work, she would do so. Though the incident was not in the script, it was forthwith enthusiastically embodied in the story. Curiously enough, a week after this harmless tumble of four thousand feet, Houdini slipped in a prison-breaking scene, fell three feet, and suffered a nasty fracture of the wrist.

In "Terror Island," again, Houdini had a narrow escape wholly unconnected with the risks nominated in the script. While working on Catalina Island he saw a small launch, with several passengers, which had been caught in

a sudden gale and was being swept on the rocks. Tying a line about his waist, he leaped from a cliff into the sea and struck out for the launch. The combination of surf and submerged rocks proved too much for him. By the time some men in a lifeboat pushed out to him he was nearly unconscious and cut and bruised from head to heel.

Houdini's directors were greatly troubled by their hero's casualness in the love scenes. Houdini's puritanical soul apparently shrank from this part of the game, and his nervous reluctance in such scenes aroused no little merriment among his associates. One frantic director, after trying vainly through a futile morning to persuade Houdini to embrace the heroine as if he were not submitting to a painful duty, as a last resort entreated Mrs. Houdini to leave the lot. "Whenever we get him to the point of kissing the girl," he said, "he spoils the shot by glancing anxiously at you."

Mrs. Houdini thoroughly enjoyed this situation. Houdini, conscience-smitten over the impropriety of being compelled to kiss another woman, had insisted on giving his wife five dollars for each enforced osculation. At one period in the course of the filming, Houdini complained that through some false motion on the part of the heroine he was being called on to repeat a number of the kissing scenes. Later Mrs. Houdini confessed to him that she had explained the five-dollar arrangement to the heroine and offered to split fifty-fifty with her on extra kisses.

Both ladies gained additions to their wardrobes through the deal.

During his interlude in the films, for the first time in his twenty-five years of married life Houdini enjoyed a protracted period with free evenings to spend with his wife and with his hobbies. His first three pictures were made in California, and his leisurely evenings at home in the modest bungalow he had rented at Hollywood were a great treat to him. He was embodying his years of research into the careers of earlier wonder-workers in a book, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods*, and he put the finishing touches on the manuscript during this period. Also he shaped the first plans for his book on spiritualism, which was to prove a valuable contribution to the literature of quackery. Fellow players returning from late parties, who might have been moved to investigate the solitary light burning in the Houdini bungalow, would have seen the handcuff king and escape artist scratching busily with his pen, at a table littered with manuscripts and old volumes. At forty-five he was still using the nineteen-hour day and finding it overcrowded with the work he wanted to do.

Despite Houdini's heroic efforts, none of the pictures proved a conspicuous financial success. The public was so accustomed to fabricated thrills in the movies that Houdini's genuine feats, his hazardous risks in air and water, and his almost superhuman escapes, attracted no extraordinary enthusiasm. The average audience probably as-

sumed that the more difficult stunts were simply screen illusions.

Although the pictures did not make a fortune for any one, Houdini's name did find a reasonable market for them, and they were shown in virtually every country in the world. The gross receipts of "The Grim Game" and "Terror Island," up to December 31, 1926, were $197,327 and $165,003 respectively. In the case of "The Grim Game," $147,641 was received in the United States, and for "Terror Island" $111,145, the balance in each case coming from leasings in other countries.

After the work on "Terror Island" was ended, Houdini returned east, filled with enthusiasm and with plans. He planned to have himself filmed leaping from the top of the Woolworth Building and from the Eiffel Tower with a parachute, and taking other lofty risks. Early in 1920 he read *Monte Cristo* for the first time and noted excitedly in his diary: "This part was made for me." Unfortunately he later learned that some other film adapter had been ahead of him. Also the two tower jumps that had so excited him proved too difficult to arrange.

Everywhere he went about lugging a motion-picture camera and shooting bits of scene that seemed unusual or having himself filmed in some extraordinary situation. When he visited a cemetery he would of course have himself taken among the graves. He haunted motion-picture houses and commented on the productions at length in his diary. Managers in houses where he was performing began to be annoyed at his practice of taking up

much of the time for his act in showing pictures of himself, while he delivered an explanatory lecture. He had several violent altercations about this matter.

By the beginning of 1921 his enthusiasm had led him to organize his own producing organization, the Houdini Picture Corporation, in which he was to serve as manager, author, editor, caption writer, supervisory director, and star. It proved a large order.

For his first film, "The Man From Beyond," he had an ingenious idea. The hero is supposed to have been frozen in a block of ice for a century in a state of suspended animation. As he is chopped out by arctic explorers he breathes the name of his lady love, dead for many years. Later he finds consolation in one of her descendants and incidentally is plunged into escapades quite unsuitable for a gentleman contemporary with the War of 1812.

At first, Houdini planned to have professional assistance in preparing the script. This did not work out well; so he went at it alone. According to the diary, he wrote steadily on the story for ten days and then took his company to Lake Placid to film the arctic scenes. There were troubles about location, sets were not ready, the work was held up by rain. Houdini had his feet frozen. There was an interlude at Niagara for the episode where Houdini swims out and rescues the girl from the brink of the falls. This was a real performance, though a steel wire, not visible on the screen, was fastened to Houdini's body from a reel on the shore, in the event of mishap.

Finally, after eighteen weeks of labor, the film was done. Houdini had visions of making his fortune.

The managers who had a pre-view were not enthusiastic. They thought there had been some serious miscasting, and there was not enough love interest. For Houdini the love interest was merely a thread on which to string a succession of thrilling exploits. He did not realize that Mrs. Feitelbaum and Mrs. Dooley and the other patrons considered Niagara rescues as wholly secondary matters. The picture opened not too auspiciously at the Times Square Theater in New York. Thereafter Houdini appeared with it in person in a number of theaters, wherever he could spare the time, and gave a short talk on the stage. For a time he seemed to put it over by sheer force of personality, but the fortune he anticipated was not in it.

His next picture, "Haldane of the Secret Service," was simply a failure. He lost money on it, and the Houdini Picture Corporation made no more ventures. By that time, however, his enthusiasm for pictures was beginning to fade before his interest in exposing the frauds in spiritualism. He was girding up his loins for his great crusade, and beside this his labors and adventures and losses in the pictures seemed minor episodes.

XIX

WHEN Houdini sailed for England in 1920 to fulfill contracts made seven years before, he had become an institution in his own country. Thousands of newspaper columns had been written about his exploits and his career. For several years his name or his feats had been in common usage by editorial writers, newspaper columnists, paragraphers, cartoonists, and the writers of advertisements. Clergymen used him as a subject for sermons under such titles as "Life's Strait-Jackets" and "Houdini and the Art of Getting Out of Things." Funk and Wagnalls' *New Standard Dictionary*, issued in 1920, contained the following:

"HOUDINI, HARRY (1874-). American mystericist, wizard, and expert in extrication and self-release.

"HOUDINIZE, *v.t.* To release or extricate oneself (from confinement, bonds and the like), as by wriggling out."

In the language of the street, "to do a Houdini" had become a common expression for vanishing, breaking away. Through the length and breadth of the land Houdini was regarded as the symbol of elusiveness and illusion.

In England a tuppenny weekly, *The Kinema Comic*, which provided literary nourishment for persons of moderate intellect, was beginning a serial entitled "The Amazing Exploits of Houdini—Written by Houdini Himself," which was to run for seven years. None of the exploits

was authentic, none was written up by Houdini; but the term "amazing" was wholly justified.

By directors of the American vaudeville business, Houdini was rated in a class by himself. Executives like Mr. E. F. Albee and Mr. Martin Beck described him as "the greatest showman since Barnum," others as "the greatest of American showmen, not excepting Barnum." These encomiums were bestowed in the sober counting offices, as solid business verdicts, not for purposes of press agentry. The managers had come to know that once Houdini was signed to a contract—in which he could virtually write his own figures—there was no further need to worry about the box office. Houdini could be counted on invariably to "pack them in." If the billing or advertising were poor, he would take time to attend to such details himself.

It was a truism in the business offices of the vaudeville managers that a good performer was good for only two swings around the circuit. After that the public grew weary of him. Houdini smashed this dictum by filling his houses in the same cities year after year. His secret was consummate showmanship plus versatility. His audiences knew that he would produce a whole new bag of tricks each time he swung into their ken. Each time they looked for fresh and greater thrillers, and Houdini never disappointed them.

He took his art with the most painstaking seriousness, and this seriousness seemed to increase as he grew older. Sometimes this attitude of his caused persons who did not know him very well to ridicule him as a poseur or to as-

sume that he suffered from swollen ego. A wrong appraisal was natural enough. Houdini had worked at his calling nineteen or twenty hours a day for thirty years or more, and it was also natural enough that he should have developed a high sense of professional dignity. Woe to his friends who displayed any levity in connection with his acts! He would crush them publicly and further salve his wounded dignity by writing harsh comments on them in his diary.

At the first benefit of the National Vaudeville Artists at the New York Hippodrome in 1914, Jim Morton and Loney Haskell, both past masters in comedy introductions, were masters of ceremonies. Houdini,[1] awaiting his turn, listened with growing apprehension to a few of their burlesque preliminaries. Then he quietly made some arrangements with Pat Casey, the stage manager, and, as his name was called, dashed on the stage and started a few bits of magic before the masters of ceremonies had a chance to weave any smart cracks about him.

At Houdini's last benefit performance, that of the Jewish Federation, at the Polo Grounds in New York, a few weeks before his death, he again found himself confronted by the jocose Loney Haskell as master of ceremonies. This time Haskell waited until Houdini was being tied up in a strait-jacket, whereupon he started a satirical introduction, asserting that Houdini could not escape from a Gus Sun contract or from the traffic jam at Forty-Second

[1] Houdini's *chef d'œuvre* of the occasion was escaping from a strait-jacket in which he had been laced by Eva Tanguay, Eddie Foy, six soldiers, and six marines. The crowd cheered him for five minutes.

Street and Broadway. He was proceeding merrily, all at Houdini's expense, when he was stopped by a tremendous kick in the shins. Houdini, tied up, had wriggled halfway across the stage to administer that kick. Red-faced with anger, he lay at Haskell's feet, glaring up at him. "No, no!" he whispered savagely. "No comedy." Haskell limped into the wings to see if his ankle was broken. As soon as the act was over, Houdini rushed to him, all contrition and apologies: "I just can't stand comedy, Lon," he kept repeating.

Yet he was not without humor, and he could even be a party, on occasion, to a joke reflecting on his own professional skill. One of the minor functionaries at Hammerstein's, something of a queer stick, was a profound Houdini enthusiast. He was always chanting Houdini's praises. The house physician, as a joke, disparaged Houdini and said he had a pair of handcuffs which would baffle the wizard. The enthusiast finally agreed to have them locked on him and to wear them until Houdini opened them, and also to wager a hundred dollars on the result. Houdini fell in with the doctor's scheme and gave a fine imitation of a man working vainly over a lock. Finally he announced that he must give up. The cuffs were ordinary police restraints which he could have whisked open in an instant.

For thirty-six hours the enthusiast, shocked and dismayed, went about wearing his ungraceful bracelets. Whenever possible he waylaid Houdini, begging him to try again. At the last encounter, Houdini merely drew his hands across the gyves and ruefully shook his head.

"I'm beaten. I can do nothing." "But, Mr. Houdini, what *can* I do?" pleaded the worshiper. "Perhaps if you look at them steadily they will fall off," said Houdini. The man glanced down at the cuffs—to find that the cuffs lay open on his wrist.

Houdini was not always an easy player for managers to deal with. He had quarrelsome periods, but his outbursts of temper, furious while they lasted, were quickly spent and generally forgotten forthwith. For the last twenty-five years of his life he was head of the bill everywhere, and woe to the manager who failed to accord him all the prerogatives that went with that position.

Once when Houdini was playing at Hammerstein's in New York, he agreed to permit the name of a woman performer to stand on the electric light signs just under his, and in letters almost as large as his own. The lady's ambitious but discourteous manager had photographs made of the signs, erased Houdini's name, and in all the theatrical papers cuts appeared showing his principal apparently heading the Hammerstein bill. When Houdini saw the cuts he smashed the furniture in the offending manager's office, demanding damages from all the innocently offending editors, and gave everybody about Hammerstein's a most uncomfortable week. This was not an isolated incident. On his last visit to Los Angeles he discovered that the management had featured two minor performers in the newspapers, with photographs, while his own photograph was conspicuously absent. "Lost my temper," he records, with obvious reluctance, in the diary.

"I raised hell foolishly in Prazza office. All wrong on my part, *but I could not help it.* I was so sore. I was so sore I had a headache all that afternoon."

At other times he would go out of his way to encourage and assist those on the bill with him. The worst place on the bill was held by those who came after Houdini, for there was always an exodus from the house after he took his curtain. Houdini, aware of the disability of those that followed him, would linger in the wings to encourage and hearten them—especially if they were young and inexperienced. Persons in the front rows would sometimes be puzzled by hearing a violent outburst of applause from somewhere behind the scenes after one of these post-Houdini acts. It would be Houdini, clapping until his hands ached to comfort his unfortunate colleague for a sadly thinned-out house.

In vaudeville circles, Houdini had few close friends and no intimates. He was known as a non-mixer, not because he was either surly or proud, but because he was always too busy to play about much with his fellow performers. Even his constant business associates knew virtually nothing about his personal affairs. "For thirty years Houdini worked for me under one contract and another," said Mr. E. F. Albee, director of the Keith Circuit, "but I never knew him intimately and I never met any one who did, except his wife. I never knew how he did a sirgle trick." Mr. Martin Beck, Houdini's first mentor in showmanship and his friend for a third of a century, confessed to a similar lack of intimacy.

Houdini had a delightful professional friendship with Harry Keller, and the two men corresponded for years, but they could hardly be called intimates. After his mother's death, Houdini's only confidential associate besides his wife was his attorney, Mr. Bernard M. L. Ernst, who succeeded him as president of the Society of American Magicians. To Mr. Ernst, Houdini entrusted his business affairs, and he consulted him in his manifold controversies. When the lawyer would veto one of Houdini's rash proposals, Houdini would storm and threaten, but in the end he would usually adopt the lawyer's suggestions, sometimes forgetting that they were not his own. Mr. Ernst, for his part, frequently complained of Houdini's habit of calling him on the telephone for business consultations at all hours of the night from whatever part of the country he happened to be in. Houdini's excuse was that he had no time to think of important matters during the day, and that he could not remember that when it was midnight in the Far West, it was 3 A.M. in New York.

If social affairs generally had little attraction for him, family gatherings were an exception. Matters pertaining to his own and his wife's nearest of kin, and their uncles and cousins and nephews and nieces, were his constant concern. He liked nothing better than to entertain a mob of relatives at his home on some family anniversary, and he was always at pains to provide ample supplies of wine, though he himself drank nothing but water.

"Laying off to have Bess celebrate her birthday," reads one entry in the diary. "Came from Philadelphia. Even

had fine menu cards printed, though at first she didn't wish them. Bess originally invited thirty-six guests, but, lo and behold, sixty-five arrived. Bess was equal to the occasion, though somewhat flurried, and my assistants, Franz, Collins, and Jim Vickery, helped in the kitchen. Brother Nat lent us three of his waiters. (Wish he had not, for they damaged more goods, ate more material, for they were experienced waiters and took advantage of every point.) But this was the biggest and happiest affair ever held in No. 278." Another entry: "Mayer Sam Weiss had his Barmitz dinner here. Bess prepared and I paid for it. Had five gallons of fine red wine. Over sixty guests."

His relations with his assistants were stormy and deeply affectionate. One, Franz Kukol, was with him for twenty years and named his child for Houdini. James Collins and James Vickery served him for eighteen years. All three adored Houdini. They carried him to his grave. Several times a month he would have a violent quarrel with one or another of them and give them the traditional two weeks' notice to quit. None of them ever paid any attention to such incidents, and Houdini would have forgotten by the next day all about the angry dismissal.

Houdini never raised the salaries of any of his employees. He simply never thought about such matters. At intervals his assistants would raise their own salaries, merely by going to the secretary, Miss Julia Sawyer, and telling her to make out the weekly check with the desired increase. Mrs. Houdini, who included the rôles of treas-

urer and budget-maker in her manifold responsibilities, occasionally became alarmed at the swelling pay roll and would complain to Houdini. Almost invariably Houdini refused to listen to her. "Of course that raise is O.K., Bess," he would cry impatiently. "Think of the high cost of living."

Houdini's most beloved subordinate was John Sargent, his private secretary for many years. When the Houdinis were on the road, Sargent would remain in their home to look after the collections and to attend to other personal matters. Houdini and Sargent would be in constant communication, and as soon as they began to write letters to each other, they would become involved in a violent quarrel. On Houdini's return the quarrel would culminate in a scene of violent recriminations. "We always felt sorry for John Sargent on our arrival home," Mrs. Houdini says. "He was a gentler man than Houdini, and of course he had the disadvantage of being the employee. Seated down in the basement, we would listen to the roar and thunder of the storm in the library. Finally would come a break, and presently we could hear them laughing together. The quarrel was forgotten. They were deep in the subject of their beloved magic."

One of the most curious characters Houdini associated with himself was the aged Alfred Becks, who served as librarian from 1920 to his death in the spring of 1925. Becks was seventy-four years old when he came to Houdini from the dramatic library of Harvard University on the recommendation of Robert Gould Shaw, the dramatic

collector. Born in England, he had come to the States as a boy. He was with Lotta Crabtree as secretary and manager for about five years and served about the same length of time with Dion Boucicault. For many years he was private secretary to A. M. Palmer and played bits in the old Fourteenth Street Theater. He was a scholar and an authority on the drama and dramatic literature.

While with Houdini, save for his sleeping-hours in a small bedroom of the Houdini house, Becks literally lived in the library. Promptly at nine each morning, he would enter the library dressed in a suit of Houdini's old clothes. His meals were served to him there, as he negotiated stairs with difficulty. At five he went to his own room and presently returned dressed in a suit of his own clothes, which were even more threadbare than Houdini's frayed and baggy cast-offs. The change symbolized that from that time on through the evening he was no longer working as a hireling, but on his own initiative, for the love of it. He never quit the library before nine in the evening.

Becks assisted in Houdini's buying for the library, and when he and Houdini had a streak of enthusiastic collecting, they not infrequently fell foul of Mrs. Houdini, the family treasurer, who was faced with the necessity of making both ends meet. "How much did this lot cost?" she would demand, coming on them breaking open some newly arrived box of old tomes. Both men would mutter that they could not remember. Neither of them was good at deception.

When Becks came home with acquisitions for the

library, he would creep stealthily up the front stoop, hide the books in the vestibule, and then steal down again and ring the basement bell. Almost invariably Mrs. Houdini detected him in this maneuver, but she never had the heart to reveal her knowledge. Often she would ask: "What, no books, Mr. Becks?"

"Madam," he would answer, "you see my hands are perfectly empty."

Then he would move on upstairs, quietly open the front door, recover his cache, and smuggle it into the library.

One day Mrs. Houdini's brother John was pressed into service to assist Becks in moving some heavy boxes. John, in the words of Mrs. Houdini, did not know a Garrick autograph from a Barnum, and when he got the boxes mixed, Becks flew into such a violent rage that Mrs. Houdini had to spirit John out of the house. They never dared let the old man see John again for fear that he might have a stroke.

Becks could not afford to be a collector on his own account, but once, when a certain dramatic set was coming up for auction, he informed Houdini that he intended to buy those books for himself. Houdini also coveted the set, and without telling Becks he dispatched an agent to bid them in for him under an assumed name. Becks returned from the auction in a disconsolate state, reporting that some stranger had overbidden him. Thereupon Houdini was so ashamed of his smart trick that when the books came he hid them away in the cellar, and there they remained.

When Becks died in 1925, Houdini was smitten with grief. According to the old man's instructions, the body was removed to the home of some relatives in the city. It appeared to Houdini that his old friend was to have a shabby funeral; so the day before the services he visited three different florists and sent three elaborate floral pieces, each under a different assumed name, so that Becks would not be buried without a display of friendly interest.

After he returned from the funeral he sat in his chair and wept. Suddenly he straightened up. "Now I suppose I can get those books out of the cellar," he exclaimed. Immediately he darted downstairs and presently had the books up and busied himself for a time arranging them in the library. Finally he returned to his chair, and Mrs. Houdini heard him groan. "Poor old Becks!" Houdini cried, and was weeping again.

Becks was succeeded by O. S. Teale, who assisted Houdini in his investigations of spiritualism and in his literary work.

Houdini never wearied of performing or doing other favors for children or old persons, especially old women. When he produced bouquets of flowers out of thin air at his performances, any white-haired woman in the audience was sure to have a rose tossed into her lap with a reverent and affectionate gesture in which there was more than mere showmanship. Each week Houdini's mail would contain scores of letters from old ladies. They were the only "mash notes" to which he paid any attention. Many of them he kept. One, written in a shaky hand, which

was found treasured among his intimate papers after his death, read: "How did you know I needed a rose? I am ill and lonely. I came to your performance to see the crowds, to know there were others on earth. A lonely, lonely woman, and you threw me a rose."

He was continually embarrassing managers by insisting that the entire registry of some old people's home be invited to a performance, and often suggesting that free transportation be provided for them. Once, playing in a provincial city in Canada, Houdini nearly broke his contract when the manager refused to provide seats for one hundred indigent old men in an institution near by. "I'll see them damned first," the manager said, and in the next few minutes he was treated to the full force of the Houdini vocabulary. Houdini finished out his week, but he would never work for that manager again. In his later years he added prisons and institutions for the feeble-minded to his places of call. Among many of the convicts he found a sort of semi-professional appreciation of his skill.

Houdini's love for children was a by-word among managers. Hardly a week went by that he did not give a performance at some hospital or orphan asylum or other institution, and he invited the inmates in great blocks to his regular shows. He even invented a whole performance for blind children. Almost every week he would return from an exhibition at some asylum to tell Mrs. Houdini of some child he had almost brought home to her, but always they would defer such an adventure until the day

they "settled down." On that elusive date, they promised themselves gayly, they would adopt dozens.

Playing in Edinburgh, Scotland, in cold weather, Houdini was shocked at the number of boys and girls on the streets without shoes. He bought three hundred pairs at a bootmaker's and invited all shoeless children to the theater. His fellow performers became infected with his charitable enthusiasm, and the whole cast volunteered as shoe fitters to the children. For a time the theater resembled a settlement house. In the end there remained a considerable surplus of children without shoes. Houdini gathered together the disappointed ones and rushed off with them to the bootmaker, whose children's stock he quite cleaned out. A week later, in Glasgow, he kept an audience waiting ten minutes while he stopped to mend the broken crutch of a little crippled girl he met on the street.

He had a way with animals as well as with children. He was continually adopting dogs, cats, canary birds, parrots, and other pets and training them to various tricks. He taught his pet fox terrier, Bobby, to escape from a pair of tiny handcuffs, and Bobby the Handcuff Dog won considerable fame in his day. He would squirm out of one cuff and, standing on his hind legs, frantically wave the other before the audience for their applause, until that too broke open. Houdini also trained an American eagle to fly about and fetch and carry at his command. According to Houdini, this was the only tame eagle since the famous Old Abe of Civil War days.

Because of his tenderness for helpless persons, he was constantly adding to his list of pensioners in the shape of superannuated or incapacitated persons. At the time of his death he was supporting scores of persons suffering from various disabilities. Some of them he never even knew personally. On his last visit to Paris an aged man embraced him on the street, much to Houdini's annoyance, crying: "*Mon dieu*, it is Houdini!" As Houdini drew back, the man exclaimed: "M. Houdini, don't you know me? I am the man whose rent you have been paying for ten years!"

One down-and-out performer, smitten with tuberculosis, Houdini assisted to reach Colorado; he supported him there for some years. When the man died, he had but one thing to will to his benefector; so he left Houdini his body. The first intimation the Houdinis had of the man's death was an embarrassing telegram telling that the body was being shipped. "Poor old Blank!" Houdini sighed decorously. "We'll give him a swell funeral." Mrs. Houdini, more practical-minded, had visions of Blank in his coffin being planted in her sitting-room for an indefinite period along with the first death-chair used at Auburn and other gruesome relics acquired by her sentimental husband. She recalled that Blank had never been a close friend of Houdini's, merely an acquaintance whose plight had enlisted his sympathy. She therefore mustered up courage to suggest that it would be best for all concerned if Blank's "swell funeral" were held in Colorado. Houdini was shocked, and there was an argument; but in the

end Mrs. Houdini had her way, and her husband dutifully went out to send the telegram that would head off the strange bequest.

Houdini's interest in cemeteries and graves seemed to increase as he grew older. The diary records visits to the resting-places not only of various relatives and friends, but of his friend's parents. The pages are sprinkled with entries like the following: "Took a wreath to Harry Day's [2] father's grave in New Light Cemetery." "Bess and I go to Family Plot. We also visit my father-in-law's grave in Calvary Cemetery. He is buried in Plot 9." "Visited Harry Day's father's grave. In very bad condition." "Out to Cypress Hills Cemetery. Unveiling of Uncle Newman's monument." "Visited Ralph Johnston's [3] grave at Mt. Washington Cemetery, 103, sec. 2. He is buried at his mother's side and near his sister. I covered his grave with red roses and placed some on his mother's grave and also his sister Mary's." "Visited Dean Harry Keller's grave at Rosedale Cemetery. . . . I placed a small bunch of flowers in the holder." "Visited cemetery. Placed flowers on graves of all mother's friends that I knew."

Houdini also never seemed to tire of visiting insane asylums. In March, 1925, the diary records three such visits in a single week, and at two of the places he gave free shows for the inmates. After the third visit, he wrote: "There ought to be a law to put them out of their misery.

[2] Harry Day was Houdini's English manager.

[3] Ralph Johnston, an aviator, was a friend of Houdini's. He was killed while flying.

I would not do it myself, but some of the cases are terrible."

Once, in Los Angeles, a friendly detective took him to a local asylum, where Houdini wished to borrow a strait-jacket for his show. As they entered the yard, the detective said: "Here comes the head physician; I'll introduce you." Houdini's note of the encounter, found among his papers, reads as follows:

"Along came the doctor. My friend the detective said: 'Dr. Swindon, allow me to introduce my friend Mr. Houdini, the world-famous handcuff king, the man who escapes out of handcuffs and strait-jackets and padded cells.'

"The doctor shook hands with me and said: 'I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Houdini. I hope you are well.'

"I said, 'Oh, yes, very well.' He said, 'Have you tried to escape out of any of the padded cells here?' I said, 'No, sir, I have not tried.' He said, 'You might try some day, when you get time. How are they treating you?' I replied, 'They are treating me very well, thanks to my detective friend here.' 'Do they give you enough to eat?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'Hold out your right hand.' I did so. 'Let me see your tongue.' I complied with his request. He looked me in the eye and remarked, 'I guess you are all right.'

"No sooner had he turned his back when my friend the detective threw himself on the grass, roaring with laughter. When the doctor realized his error he besought me to keep it a secret."

Though Houdini devoted the last years of his life to a crusade against fraud and superstition, he cherished to the end several little pet superstitions of his own. His squeamishness about undertaking his more dangerous feats on Friday or on the thirteenth of the month, and particularly on a Friday that fell on the thirteenth, has already been referred to. He made several solemn pacts with friends for communicating with them after one or the other died, and he never tired of discussing the feasibility of such posthumous communications, or of watching for a sign from some deceased friend. He was particularly expectant of a message from his secretary, John Sargent, after Sargent's death. One evening he went to the bathroom to shave and presently came dashing out, his face half covered with lather, in a state of wild excitement. "Bess, Bess, come quick!" he cried. "I think Sargent is trying to reach me." Sure enough, in the bathroom an odd, telegraph-like tapping was plainly audible. The practical Mrs. Houdini, however, soon discovered that the spirit telegraphy came from a loose shutter swaying in the wind. In February, 1920, while he was paying a visit to Lafayette's grave in Edinburgh, a flower pot which he had placed temporarily on the footstone suddenly crashed to the earth, though there was no wind blowing. The pot was replaced and presently toppled over a second time and broke. Houdini, all excitement, exclaimed that Lafayette might be trying to give him a "sign." Mrs. Houdini had difficulty in convincing him that perhaps her dress had

brushed against the pot, knocking it over. He remained agitated for several days.

Houdini was a great reader for a person so engrossed in active physical work. He took a lively interest in applied science, and his collections led to an interest in the arts, but politics, economics, or international affairs meant little or nothing to him, though he worked up a sentimental enthusiasm for certain political figures, such as Theodore Roosevelt. His first vote was cast in 1905 for William Randolph Hearst for mayor of New York. He voted for Harding for president and Al Smith for governor of New York in 1920. Aside from these two large occasions, there is no evidence that he ever exercised the franchise.

His diaries, kept for thirty years, were of every conceivable shape and size, from little two-by-three-inch booklets to broad volumes with legal-size pages. They have periods of profuse entries and long lapses of blank pages. Some of his most important feats pass unnoted. His escape from the Guiteau cell in the Federal prison at Washington, which put Houdini on the front pages of newspapers throughout the country and gave him his first large dose of notoriety, is wholly ignored in the diary. On occasions when he effected other widely-heralded escapes, the diary may be wholly taken up with an account of the death of a pet kitten or canary bird, details of the illness, Mrs. Houdini's grief, and how they buried the pet in a corner of the garden.

In regard to money matters, Houdini remained always a child. As soon as he reached the point where he was

earning real money, he refused any longer to think about the troublesome commodity. His personal wants were of the simplest, but when he was out collecting there was no limit to his expenditures save his wife's stern veto when she saw bankruptcy impending. He seldom knew how much money he possessed, and he rarely had any cash in his pockets, for if he started out with any, the first street-corner beggar would turn his pockets inside out. He would order a generous dinner for a party of friends at some hotel or restaurant and serenely walk out without thinking to settle or even tip the waiter. Taxicab drivers in the larger American cities became used to having Houdini hop out of the car and vanish, leaving behind only a cheerful "Good evening." They would collect later. Newsboys and bootblacks in his neighborhood learned by experience that Houdini carried no change, but his wife would pay.

He never kept accounts, but in small things he was frugal. Each week on the road he carefully entered the cost of their lodgings in his diary, and not infrequently he changed hotels in the middle of the week on the promise of a slightly cheaper rate. He fretted at intervals over expenditures for such minor things as postage stamps and having his clothes pressed. On one occasion, receiving a note from a minor magician who was stranded in a distant city and wished to borrow five hundred dollars on no security, Houdini immediately made out a check, and he spent the next half hour berating his secretary because she had spilt ink on the envelope and a stamp was wasted. Once when Houdini was playing in London, a command

performance of *Money* was given at Drury Lane, at which the Kaiser and Kaiserin were guests of King George and Queen Mary. Through friends at Scotland Yard, Houdini procured for his wife one of the first-tier boxes reserved for the nobility. He sent her, accompanied by a maid, to the affair in a shiny Rolls-Royce, with chauffeur and footman in gold-trimmed livery, so that his Bess might sit as an equal with duchesses and queens. This bit of exhibitionism cost Houdini eight hundred dollars, but he thought nothing of that.

Houdini was as careless about his personal appearance as he was about money matters. His clothes never seemed to fit him. He preferred ready-made clothes and would buy the most grotesque sizes. His brothers and friends, in despair at his shabby appearance, would entice him to a first-class tailor, but twenty-four hours after he secured the suit it would be baggy and wrinkled. Once he took up a suit of clothes, he would continue to wear it indefinitely. While he was on the stage, his wife would substitute another suit, in order to have the original pressed. Houdini never noticed the change. Mrs. Houdini similarly had to steal his soiled underwear in the night, to get him to change, and if she did not watch him carefully he would be likely to go out wearing one black sock and one tan sock.

When Mrs. Houdini presented her husband with a dozen pairs of fine silk socks at Christmas he was overjoyed—and stuck them away in a drawer while he continued to wear his faded cotton ones. When his birthday

came around, Mrs. Houdini stole back the silk socks and gave them as his birthday present. Houdini, never suspecting the theft, again expressed his delight—and once more stored the gift away in his drawer.

Once Mrs. Houdini was ill in New York while Houdini was playing a week in Cincinnati. She arranged six shirts, with studs all affixed, and marked them: "Wear this Monday," "Wear this Tuesday," etc. When she arrived at Cincinnati at the end of the week the shirts still lay in their original laundered virginity—Houdini had never changed.

On an occasion they were invited to a smart house-party up the Hudson River. Mrs. Houdini was away when the invitation arrived, and the husband relayed it to her over the telephone. She arranged to meet him on the train, and she told him to instruct the maid to pack a bag with the usual things, his dinner clothes, her evening frock, etc. Houdini duly appeared with a huge bag, but when they reached their destination and Mrs. Houdini started to unpack it, she found it crammed full of old books, spirit slates, and similar impedimenta. Houdini had completely forgotten the clothes. On another similar occasion Mrs. Houdini carefully packed the bag herself. On the way, however, Houdini met Edwin Markham, the poet, and struck up one of his quick friendships. After they arrived, he and Markham vanished for a long walk and they did not reappear until after dinner was served, when they tramped in and took their places at the table unconcernedly in their old clothes and muddy boots.

One evening, at a country-house party where the Houdinis were guests, a summons came from the hostess for aid in arranging a buffet supper. Mrs. Houdini, glancing through the window, observed her husband standing near the center of activity: "I see Mr. Houdini in there," she remarked, "but he won't be any good to them." Then she added in a burst of confidence: "You know, he's the most helpless man in the world." There was a burst of laughter among the bystanders at this wifely verdict.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of ladies' man," declared Houdini to a newspaper interviewer when he was at Hollywood working on his first picture. "I am so old-fashioned that I have been in love with the same wife for twenty-five years." He was really profoundly disturbed and annoyed at the necessity for even pretending to make love to another woman before the camera. That sort of thing was out of his code. He was not only a rigid monogamist himself; he exacted as much in his intimates. If they violated his code, they stepped out of his life.

His own marriage remained both a most intimate companionship and a romance for him for thirty-three years. He used many a deft little artifice to foster the romantic element. On occasion, with an air of portentous confession, he would remark: "Mrs. Houdini, you are a modern woman of liberal ideas. You will not be angry if I keep a date this evening. I expect to meet the most beautiful lady in the world at such and such a corner at six-thirty. I shall be home very late."

This would be Mrs. Houdini's cue to dress herself up

in her best frills and keep the assignation. Houdini would pick her up with the air of a grand cavalier and whisk her into a taxicab and off to some jazzy suburban road-house. With an air of mystery he would order a private dining-room, and there, tête-à-tête, they would enjoy a gorgeous meal, always with champagne, for the lady was fond of that beverage, though Houdini drank only water. Many an innocent waiter was fooled by the illicit and non-connubial atmosphere of these visits. "That guy in No. 5 is Houdini—with a woman." The old vaudeville gag—"Who was that lady I seen you with last night?" "That wasn't no lady, that was my wife"—might have been written seriously about these romantic escapades of Houdini.

Houdini's puritan habits made him a jealous husband. He conceived it his duty to guard his wife against objectionable contacts. In Mrs. Houdini's view, some of the contacts he shooed away were interesting rather than dangerous, and probably she was right; but they were warded off none the less. At one time, in the earlier days, Houdini even attempted to supervise his wife's reading. Her literary taste at that time ran to Laura Jean Libbey and Bertha M. Clay, and Houdini was so distressed by this that he took to writing stories himself to develop a better appreciation in her. Some of the stories were printed and paid for too. Most of them were romantic fairy tales, showing no little imagination, in which strong men and magicians figured in plots of impeccable morality. Young Mrs. Houdini read them with appreciative delight, and in

private continued to devour the zippy moral realism of Mesdames Libbey and Clay.

Once and once only did Mrs. Houdini venture in a small way to put Houdini's personal jealousy to the test. They were at a party at which the pace was a bit swifter than at those they commonly attended. A certain colonel invited Mrs. Houdini to sit on his knee and drink a glass of champagne with him. The colonel and his knee had no attraction for Mrs. Houdini, but she was seized with a whimsical desire to see how Houdini would react to such a performance. A few minutes later, when Houdini entered the room, the scene was set. Mrs. Houdini was sipping her champagne and gazing roguishly up at the colonel, and his arm was about her waist.

Houdini stopped sharply in the doorway with an expression of incredulous horror on his face that his wife never forgot. His knees sagged as if he had received a knockout blow. Mrs. Houdini rushed to him and helped him to a chair. He could hardly speak. She helped him into a taxi and into their lodgings. None of her explanations could lift him from his utter prostration of spirit. He wept bitterly far into the night. For days he dragged himself about, brooding and dejected.

Weeks afterward they were dining with friends at a hotel. In the party was a young lieutenant in dress uniform. A passing waiter slipped and spilled the contents of nineteen cocktail glasses over this resplendent young man. As he stood up mopping himself off, he remarked,

with mock concern: "I wonder what the colonel would say?"

At the words "the colonel," Houdini pushed aside his knife and fork and an expression of deep gloom overspread his face. His evening was ruined. Mrs. Houdini had to take him home before he spoiled the occasion for every one else.

That was an isolated incident. There were plenty of compensations, for Houdini never ceased to be a romantic lover. He was never too busy to compose an elaborate love letter to his wife. After the death of his mother, in 1913, he wrote one of these letters every single day up to the time of his death—many of them long compositions, none casual lines. They were really spontaneous outpourings of ardor and devotion. If he was at home, he would hide them about the house, as parents hide Easter eggs for their children. For six months after his death in 1926, until she sold the house and moved away, Mrs. Houdini continued to discover them at intervals.

Reciprocally he treasured every scrap of writing from her. The most unimportant domestic notes written by his wife he would file away among his private papers. After his death his files revealed literally reams of these, including bits of paper with lines like: "Chicken in the ice box—pie on pantry shelf. Bess."

These diverse elements were compounded in the unusually fascinating human being, Houdini, who was at once self-sufficient, quite boyishly helpless, quick-tempered, tender-hearted, stern, sentimental, sophisticated,

childlike, lavish, frugal, impulsive, patient, resentful, kindly, awesomely sincere. Cultured persons who met him in his later years seldom suspected that his schooling had ended at the age of eleven and that he had started his professional career with the phrase: "You can see, ladies and gentlemen, that I ain't got nothing up my sleeve." He had moved far beyond such things. "Had one noticed any lack of education about Houdini," remarked a woman who herself had all the education that a New England Brahmin could command, "it would have been a thing of no consequence, because of his rare and overpowering personality."

XX

When Houdini's mother lay on her deathbed in 1913, her last moments of consciousness were consumed in a desperate effort to convey to those about her a message for her son, Houdini, then several thousand miles away. Facial paralysis proved too strong a handicap for her, and the message was never framed, though at the end she was able to speak her son's name. Just before her seizure she had received certain information, as yet unrevealed to Houdini, which she knew would cause him prolonged anguish and bitterness and would cut him off from a friend for whom he had deep affection. With her background of more than threescore and ten years, not unmarked by suffering and tragedy, her judgments on human nature were both shrewd and kindly. Doubtless in that last message she was attempting to persuade her hasty-tempered son to exercise charity and understanding, even as she did, in a situation that really concerned her more than it did him.

The blocked message never ceased to fret Houdini. A breaker of all mundane barriers, he seemed to stand before a door against which no picklock availed. Time and again he discussed with his wife the baffling problem of dragging the missing words from beyond the grave. On his frequent visits to his mother's burial plot, the idea of communication was foremost in his thoughts.

Almost since his boyhood, Houdini had been keenly

interested in spiritualistic mediums and their phenomena. He had scrutinized the work of mediums as he had scrutinized that of snake-swallowers, glass-eaters, jugglers, and others who entertained by misdirection and sleight of hand, and through observation and study he learned the secrets of the mediums as he had those of his fellow craftsmen in magic who produced wonders by avowedly natural means. So well had he learned that in his early career he had been able for a time, by substituting séances for his legitimate repertoire, to keep alive a road show to which he was attached, which was starving in a bad season out in the prairie hinterland. He was so good at the business that the heavily mortgaged yokels, who refused to respond to the usual ballyhoo of the itinerant players, flocked to the tent with their two-bit pieces to sit gaping before the Houdini wireless to the other world.

Houdini's incursion into this spectral side-line was brief. He never thereafter deserted the legitimate field, but his interest in medium shows never waned. Amidst his work on the stage, his numerous outside exhibitions, his absorption in collecting books, playbills, manuscripts, original letters, pictures, mementos, and oddities, his literary labors with their attendant painstaking researches and his impetuous occasional preoccupations with such things as flying and moving-pictures, he managed to continue uninterruptedly his investigation of the medium game. Whenever he heard of an unusual performance in this line, he went to see it in person. In all his studies he never observed any phenomena—from mind-reading and spirit

messages to levitations and materializations—which he was unable himself to reproduce under similar conditions by natural means. He saw nothing at any time to make him doubt that the medium employed the art of the magician to convince the credulous of supernatural power. As a magician he resented the unfair competition, and as a person of curiously rigid ideals of probity he was profoundly shocked at the fraud. Probably his moral revulsion was the greater because he was conscious that at one time, out of his necessity, he had himself stooped to the pious trickery.

As a result of his studies, Houdini became so proficient in the art of producing spooky phenomena that on several occasions when he gave dark-room séances for friends he could hardly convince them that no supernatural agencies were involved. On at least one such occasion persons sitting in the mystic circle beheld the luminous body of a man drift into the room through a window, float head downward in mid air for a minute or so, and then walk across the room on the ceiling and finally vanish through another window. One of the spectators even felt a spectral hand brush his hair as the apparition passed behind him in its fly-like perambulation. "It was just a trick," Houdini explained to the shivery group when the lights went on, but he refused to explain further, and most of the spectators went away wondering whether the man was a medium without being conscious of his power, or whether he might for some reason be afraid to confess to supernormal abilities. In the darkness they had not seen the

quiet, black-clad chap in their circle, a hired acrobat, move quietly in his stocking feet to the window, to receive his fellow acrobat whose clothing was lightly sprayed with luminous paint. They had no suspicion that the luminous one did a hand-balance on his invisible colleague and was thus carried about the room, finally to be tossed lightly through another open window, whereupon the invisible one stole back to his place.

Some of Houdini's effects were not so easily explained. Not long before his death, Houdini and his wife paid a visit to the country home of his attorney, Mr. B. M. L. Ernst, on Long Island. In the evening, on the porch, the talk turned to spiritualism, as it usually did when Houdini was present in those days.

"Let's have a séance!" exclaimed Mrs. Ernst. Others of the company echoed the request. Houdini said a table would be needed—any table—and one was brought from another part of the porch. About it the company sat, making a circle of their hands on the table. Houdini's hands were touching one of Mrs. Ernst's hands on one side and one of Mr. Ernst's on the other. Each of his feet was pressed down by one of theirs.

Presently in the semi-darkness (for the lights were still on in the adjoining dining-room), there came a veritable fusillade of spirit rappings. After a time the table leaped suddenly from the floor and began jerking about under their hands. To Mr. Ernst, an experienced amateur magician, this was understandable. He assumed that Houdini at one end and Mrs. Houdini at the other were manipu-

lating the table with their feet, knees, or devices with which he was familiar. At last the table dropped to the floor again. "Let us rise together, keeping our hands clasped in the magic circle," came Houdini's solemn voice. "Perhaps the spirits will give us further evidence of their power." The company, including the Houdinis, rose slowly from their places, still clasping hands, Houdini's feet still held to the floor, and to every one's amazement the table rose slowly with them, until the legs were a foot or more off the floor. Mr. Ernst could find no rational means to account for this, though he knew it was a trick. "Abracadabra!" Houdini exclaimed, with a mysterious gesture into space.

After his mother's death, Houdini's interest in so-called spirit phenomena increased. As the years went on, it became a curious blend, in which his passion for detecting and exposing fraud was mingled with his desire to recover the lost message from his mother and the wistful hope that the next medium he visited might prove to have genuine powers and could evoke the words he craved. His attitude was at once skeptical and optimistic.

Says Mrs. Houdini: "Even after our numerous disappointments, whenever we visited a new medium, Houdini, with closed eyes, would join in the opening hymn, and then sit with a rapt, hungry look on his face that would make my heart ache. I knew what message he wanted, and sometimes I felt myself tempted to give the medium the word that he longed for. I would be tempted—but I could not betray his trust in me. So the séance would go

on, the same guesses, the same trivial nonsense, the usual spook tricks that Houdini could do with his hands tied. The rapt look would fade from Houdini's face. At his next visit to his mother's grave, I would hear him say, 'Well, Mamma, I have not heard.' "

He put his hope to the test so often that it was remarkable that any remained. Toward the end, when he had satisfied himself that hundreds of mediums were merely practicing fraud, only a glimmer of hope survived, but he retained a great curiosity about the possibility of posthumous communication. His carefully planned pacts with his friends show that. According to his pact with his wife, in the event of his death, she was thereafter to attempt a tryst with him once a week. Each Sunday at a fixed hour she was to take her favorite photograph of him, sit with it before her for half an hour, and concentrate on communication. If something of him survived and it were possible to bridge the gulf, he would give a sign. At this writing, over a year has passed since the pact became operative. Each week Mrs. Houdini has fulfilled all the conditions. There has been no result. Mrs. Houdini has been deluged with letters from mediums eager to give her, for an honorarium, messages from her husband, ranging from the usual meaningless hokum to admonitions to "trust Jimmy [the medium] with the handling of your affairs."

During the six months of his tour in England and Scotland in 1920, Houdini declared that he attended over one hundred séances. The diary shows that he sometimes managed to visit two in a single day. He had long talks with

Sir Ray Lankester, who exposed Dr. Slade, prince of spirit slate writers, and with Carl Hertz, who exposed Ann O'Delia Diss Debar. He also had several fruitful conferences with Stuart Cumberland, who had enjoyed himself baiting mediums for twenty years. Cumberland's mediumistic catches included a psychic gentleman who specialized in producing the spirit of Dante. Cumberland related to Houdini how at one séance, after he had thoughtfully sprinkled tacks on the floor, the Dantean spook fled back to the inferno with a series of thoroughly uncelestial yells.

Houdini also visited Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle at Crowborough and heard the other side of the case: "Sir Arthur told me he had spoken six times with his son. No possible chance for trickery. Lady Doyle also believes and has had tests that are beyond belief."

As a result of the visit to Crowborough, a lively correspondence developed. While playing in Bristol, Houdini caused a sensation by escaping in seven minutes from a packing-case prepared by a local firm, without leaving visible marks of his exit. When Sir Arthur heard of the feat he sent Houdini a long telegram, insisting that he had dematerialized himself, and urging him, for his own good, to acknowledge his "wonderful occult power." He wrote: "You should get your proofs soon, unless all proofs and all higher personal development are cut off from you because you are not playing the game with that which has been given to you already. This is a point of view to consider. Such a gift is not given to one man in a hundred

million that he should amuse the multitude or amass a fortune. Excuse my frank talking, but you know this is all very vital to me."

Since Houdini knew every step of his thoroughly material process of escaping from the packing-box, he was not converted by Sir Arthur's plea. The correspondence continued, however. Houdini was interested in alleged spirit photographs and wrote to Sir Arthur for copies of certain ones in his possession. Sir Arthur replied by wire that the pictures were then out of his hands. He added: "But I have something far more precious, two photographs, one of a goblin, the other of four fairies taken in a Yorkshire wood. A fake, you will say. No, sir, I think not. However, all inquiry will be made."

Sir Arthur subsequently, in 1922, brought the fairy photographs to the United States. They were supposed to have been taken by a child. The New York *Herald Tribune* reproduced the pictures, accompanied by comment by photographic experts to the effect that the fairies were substantial paper dolls. The child photographer, according to the newspaper, was the fifteen-year-old daughter of a man who ran a photographic studio. A firm of candle-makers in England asserted that the "fairies" were reproductions of little figures the firm had been using for years to advertise its night lights.

During his stay in England, Houdini searched for every possible book on spiritualism and bought the volumes singly and in wholesale lots. "Bought about a hundred spiritualism books from Bruce's—a great lot. Collins

made a box so I can take them in my travels and refer to them as I write." "Bess and I go to Bath. I buy a spiritualist library from Gregory."

These activities formed no mean item in busy days in which he was haunting the cinema houses, practicing with his motion-picture camera, paying his usual visits to bookshops and galleries, rambling into graveyards, calling on old people, attending to a mail that had risen to about fifty business letters a day (excluding mash notes and epistles from enthusiasts), and meeting the challenges which his English admirers were so fond of devising. He had started his work in England handicapped with a broken ankle which he gave no decent opportunity to heal. After a few weeks, a physician who examined him in London and heard something of his daily routine, warned him that unless he gave up his more strenuous feats for a time he would endanger his life. Houdini went to a nursing home for a week and then opened in Stratford to a record house, and the ankle was forgotten.

In his regular work Houdini found himself conquering England all over again: "As an entertainer Houdini is in a class by himself," was the general verdict of the theatrical press. Somewhat to Houdini's astonishment, he found that in England his work in motion pictures had added a new and wildly enthusiastic public to his old one. "The Master Mystery" had been running to crowded houses, and its hero had become the idol of the younger generation. They packed the performances to see "Houdini

Himself" and gathered to cheer him on the streets. At Leeds a mob of six hundred shouting boys and girls followed him from the theater to his lodgings in the afternoon and waited for his reappearance to escort him back to the theater in the evening.

The pleasantest incident of his trip was a dinner given in his honor by the Magicians' Club of London, of which he had been president for seven years. It is noteworthy that this peculiarly British organization kept reëlecting the Yankee Houdini up to the time of his death, over a period of nearly fourteen years, though during that time he was able to make only two tours in England.

In Houdini's heavy and growing correspondence an increasing proportion related to spiritualistic matters. He was constantly mailing home voluminous data and reports on séances to John Sargent, his secretary, to be stored up for the book he planned to write. His research into the backgrounds of mediumistic phenomena was as painstaking as his research into the art of Robert-Houdin. He went back to the beginnings and traced the whole development.

While ghostly visitations are not new, and witchcraft and demonology, with their mysterious communications, date from early folklore, modern spirit manifestations had their beginning within the past century, and their origin is as thoroughly American as that of the cocktail, the airplane, or chewing-gum. It was in 1848 that the "spirit rappings," which, like the famous shot at Concord, were

to reverberate round the world, were first heard in a small farmhouse near the village of Hydesville, New York, which was occupied by John Fox and his wife.

The rappings started at night in the children's room, occupied by Margaret and her sister Kate, who was Margaret's junior by one and a half years. According to Margaret's later statements, accepted by Houdini, she was eight years old at that time, but her death certificate fixes her age at thirteen. The rappings started one night when the two girls went to bed in a mischievous mood. In order to frighten their superstitious mother, they tied an apple on a string and let it bump on the floor from their bed. The trick was so unexpectedly successful that they continued it on subsequent nights, and before long the neighbors were called in to listen and the house became so crowded with the inquisitive that the youngsters dared use the apple no longer. By that time they were afraid to stop or to confess; so they rapped on the bedpost instead. In time a rough telegraphic code was worked out whereby the rapping spirits could answer questions, and a full-fledged legend sprang up to the effect that the rapper was the disembodied spirit of a man who had been murdered in the house many years before. It was all a lark for the two girls.

The excitement spread over the countryside, and finally it attracted from Rochester the married sister of the girls, twenty-three years older than Margaret, a practical-minded woman. At once she shrewdly took the pair in charge. She took them to Rochester, where they stirred up

as much amazement among the townsfolk as they had among the corn-huskers. There they improved their technique by learning to make the raps by snapping the joints of either fingers or toes. There followed a lucrative series of exhibitions in New York, and then a triumphal tour of the country. Their fame spread over the civilized world, and everywhere intelligent people discussed the obvious efforts of denizens of the spirit hinterland to break through. Meanwhile an epidemic of juvenile rappings developed in America and spread to Europe. Sane and respectable mothers would boast proudly that their children were displaying "psychic powers" and that the spirits were attempting to send messages through the innocent lambs.

Not until 1888 did Margaret Fox tell the whole story of the rappings and their origin. Her "confession" appeared in the New York *World*, and she subsequently gave an exhibition at the Academy of Music, demonstrating to the satisfaction of a committee of physicians that she made the mysterious rappings with her toe-joint. Subsequently she recanted her confession. By that time, however, she was a broken-down old woman, without money, and a confirmed drunkard. Some persons believed the "confession," and others pinned their faith to the recantation; but her public exhibition of producing the rappings by snapping her wholly substantial toe-joint was on record to discomfit the credulous.

Long before this time, spirit rappings in various forms had spread over the world, and the repertoire of the spooks had greatly extended. The initial impetus to a

broader scope of manifestations was given by the Davenport Brothers, Ira Erastus and William Henry Harrison. The brothers would permit themselves to be manacled and rope-tied in a cabinet, in which a bell, a tambourine, and various other musical instruments were placed on a table. Presently the various instruments would burst into sound, and on occasion imaginative spectators declared that the instruments could be seen flying about the room. In the end the brothers would be revealed still securely manacled and tied. Ira, in his later years, explained to Houdini that they never specifically asserted that spirits aided them, but their admirers loudly proclaimed such aid, and it was the general belief that only spectral hands touched the instruments. The brothers, who toured the world, became so famous that a whole mythology sprang up about them. It was said that Ira, when a boy at home, had been "levitated" by spirits so that his head broke through the plaster of the ceiling, and that spooks once whisked him three thousand yards across the Niagara River. The legend included many other wonders, which, like the report of Mark Twain's death, were slightly exaggerated. In his old age, in his home in Maysville, New York, Ira liked to go over the old days with Houdini and tell a fellow craftsman how he and his brother would escape from the handcuffs and the ropes so that they could do their stuff.

The Davenports were Americans, and so was Daniel Dunglas Home, who further enlarged the scope of ghostly manifestations. Home's tricksy spirits snatched material objects into the other world before one's eyes,

suspended Home in the air without visible support, and performed other apparent miracles. He could also give messages from the dead. He had one awkward session in court after he had received a message from the dead husband of an English widow of seventy-five years, advising the lady to adopt Home and bestow on him an income of seven hundred pounds a year. Home, however, serenely continued his eerie activities elsewhere. By floating, or seeming to float, in and out of a narrow window, he converted Sir William Crookes to belief in his powers. With Robert Browning he had less luck. Browning, alarmed at his wife's increasing preoccupation with spirit manifestations, decided to look into the thing himself. He arranged for a session with Home, who materialized a face, supposed to be that of a son of Browning's who had died in infancy. Browning, who had not lost an infant son, snatched at the ghostly head and discovered it to be Home's bare foot.

Long before the end of the century, in almost any civilized city, one could easily find a medium who would summon the spirit of one's grandmother to ring bells, play on tambourines, rap on the furniture, make tables and chairs jump about the room, and otherwise conduct itself like a mischievous schoolboy. Intellectual folk, including physicians and scientists, gave serious consideration to such pranks, and after listening to spirit messages such as "I am very happy here. You will shortly go on a long journey," and similar enlightenment, would write discursive brochures on the possibility of wireless communion with the

shades. Simple-hearted believers, at fees ranging from four bits to what have you, could be put in touch with the apparition of some deceased family adviser who would offer infallible counsel on the patient's love-life or the real value of the oil stocks which were tempting his savings from the banker's meager 4 per cent. Some mediums produced messages written on slates with celestial hands, others had the spooks give voice through speaking-trumpets, others manipulated cameras which would turn out one's photograph with certain spectral "extras" in the background, such as the spirit of Washington or Lincoln or of a deceased maiden aunt. Still others materialized, from their mouth or nose, a frothy substance denominated "ectoplasm," which to the profane in some cases appeared to resemble soapsuds, and in other cases fine gauze. For some reason, wholly mysterious to the uninitiated, the appearance of ectoplasm seemed to be regarded as peculiarly significant, and a world-wide discussion was provoked as to whether this was genuine, all-wool spirit stuff. Apparently none of the scientists who were giving serious attention to such matters was ever moved to snatch a handful or two of this material and carry it off for chemical analysis. Possibly the learned sitters felt a little delicate over such a rough procedure because persons in the know as far as spirits were concerned took the view that if a rude sitter snatched a handful of ectoplasm the medium would die. A whole code, dictated by the spirits themselves, had developed for the manifestations. One of the chief rules was that the apparitions would perform

only in the dark. The common reason given for this was that the vibrations from the light rays checked the necessary spirit-vibrations. Another explanation generally current was that, while the spirits were operating, light would prove fatal to the medium. Since the early crude rappings of the Fox Sisters, the shadowy visitors had developed a splendid versatility, but they were still shy and wary.

Toward the end of the century the Ouija board, put on the market by some canny manufacturer, swept through the world like an epidemic. By its simple operation the members of any literate bourgeois household could scare themselves into hysterics of an evening as the pointer spelled out dispatches from the dead. For a period Ouija fanatics seeped into all the principal madhouses.

Occasionally some conspicuous medium would come a cropper, and his spooks would be revealed as decidedly earthy. Daniel Dunglas Home and Mme. Diss Debar were but two of a number of mediums who let themselves in for criminal prosecutions in which it was shown that their spirits were suspiciously motivated by economic determinism. Home was forced to disgorge after his aged female patron had been induced by his spirit messages to deed over to him large slices of her property, and Mme. Diss Debar spent several months in jail as a result of her ghostly counsels which led the elderly New York lawyer, Luther R. Marsh, to make over to her his fine house on Madison Avenue and other properties. Carl Hertz, a magician, produced out of thin air in court by natural means, which he explained to the judge, written spirit

messages similar to those obtained by Mme. Diss Debar; and at the Academy of Music, Alexander Herrmann gave a public séance at which he evoked a fine line of apparitions, made tables jump about, developed spirit photographs, and performed other bits of hocus-pocus for which Mme. Diss Debar was celebrated. The famous Dr. Slade was exposed and signed the confession that the slate writing performed by his spirits was mere trickery. Before a committee of scientists in Philadelphia, Harry Keller gave an exhibition of fraudulent spirit slate writing, which, his audience agreed, was more mystifying than anything done by Slade. J. H. Rinn and others caught the notorious Palladino in fraud after she had duped hundreds of scientific men with her spirit tricks.

Incidents such as these never daunted the protagonists of spookery. By the beginning of the second decade of the century, a little more than seventy years after the first rappings at Hydesville, when Houdini was preparing, at the age of forty-six, to undertake his crusade against fraudulent spirit-mongers, the industry was widespread and flourishing. While spookery was not exactly a vested interest, in its upper circles it was already backed by substantial endowments, and it had arrogated to itself something of the dignity of an established religion.

XXI

For over a year after his return from England in the summer of 1920, Houdini was busy with his work in motion pictures. He gave no further public performances until the end of 1921, when he started on a brief tour of the Keith Circuit. After a few weeks on the road he returned home "to work on my spirit book." Through all this period he had continued to attend séances whenever he had any spare time, and he was conducting a study of the mysteries of spirit photography. This art was further advanced in England than in the United States, and Houdini retained agents to visit the principal celestial camera-men in England and send him meticulous reports of their procedure. He also went in for practical work in the photographic line himself, and by simple methods of double exposure he could take photographs of any sitter so that the negative revealed a fine assortment of specters in the background.

Meanwhile Houdini's book, *Miracle Mongers and Their Methods,* a volume of two hundred and forty pages giving an intimate history of the fire-eaters, heat-resisters, sword-swallowers, human ostriches, and similar artists, published early in 1921, had been well received by the critics generally and won flattering encomiums from Professor Brander Matthews and other cognoscenti. While the material was doubtless whipped into literary shape by John Sargent, Houdini's secretary, the scholar-

ship was Houdini's, and the painstaking record gave an evidence of how widely, in some of his interests, the man wandered from the routine business of vaudeville and showmanship. Houdini's terse note in the diary on the publication reads: "My book *Miracle Mongers* off press and in my hand for first time. Bess has first copy."

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, still troubled over Houdini's skepticism about the spirits, was lecturing in the United States in the spring of 1922. In June he and Lady Doyle invited the Houdinis to spend a few days with them in Atlantic City. On the afternoon of June 17, Sir Arthur asked Houdini to permit Lady Doyle to give him a séance. Lady Doyle was what is known as an automatic writer. "It will be a test to see whether we can make any spirit come through for you," said Sir Arthur.

"I walked with Sir Arthur to the Doyles' suite," wrote Houdini, in *A Magician Among the Spirits*. "Sir Arthur drew down the shades so as to exclude the bright light. We three, Lady Doyle, Sir Arthur, and I, sat around the table on which were a number of pencils and a writing pad, placing our hands on the surface of the table.

"Sir Arthur started the séance with a devout prayer. I had made up my mind that I would be as religious as it was in my power to be and not at any time did I scoff at the ceremony. I excluded all earthly thoughts and gave my whole soul to the séance. I was *willing* to believe, even *wanted* to believe. It was weird to me and with a beating heart I waited, hoping that I might feel once more the presence of my beloved Mother. . . .

"Presently, Lady Doyle was 'seized by a Spirit.' . . . Her hand beat on the table, her whole body shook, and at last, making a cross at the head of the page, she started writing. As she finished each page, Sir Arthur tore the sheet off and handed it to me."

Houdini read: "Oh, my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through—I've tried, oh, so often—now I am happy. Why, of course, I want to talk to my boy—my own beloved boy. Friends, thank you with all my heart for this.

"You have answered the cry of my heart—and of his—God bless him—a thousandfold for all his life for me—never had a mother such a son—tell him not to grieve—soon he'll get all the evidence he is so anxious for. Yes, we know. . . ."

Thus for page after page, to the end: "A happiness awaits him that he has never dreamed of—tell him I am with him—just tell him that I'll soon make him know how close I am all the while—his eyes will soon be opened. Good-by again—God's blessing on you all."

Houdini had never any doubt of Lady Doyle's sincerity, so at the conclusion he was politely sympathetic, so much so that apparently the Doyles assumed that the message had started him on the road to conversion. His manner, however, concealed a keen disappointment. For him the message had no reality. He could not understand how his mother could communicate in English, when she spoke hardly a word of that language to the day of her death, or how she could omit completely all the intimate

tender phrases she had used in addressing him when alive. Finally, though Lady Doyle was unaware of it, the day was the anniversary of his mother's birth, as he phrased it, "my most holy holiday." It was inconceivable that his mother's spirit should make no reference to the occasion which had filled his thoughts throughout the day. Sir Arthur's partial explanation, delivered later, that spirits on a higher plane could use any language at will, did not serve to remove Houdini's doubts.

Thereafter the study and exposure of fraud in mediumistic practice absorbed Houdini more and more. Traveling about in eastern cities to launch his picture, "The Man from Beyond," he would give a talk to the audience during the intermission, usually on spiritualism, and duplicate some of the commoner pranks of the spooks. He wrote many letters on the same subject to newspapers, injecting himself zealously into the current controversy on spectral manifestations, and he conducted a wide personal correspondence. He also lectured on his experiences before several civic associations.

At the close of 1922, when he swung out on a six months' vaudeville tour of the West, he continued his lectures and other controversial activities as a side-line. In the diary appear occasional complaints that three shows a day in vaudeville left him too little time and energy for his warfare against quackery. By the time he reached the Pacific Coast he was giving some of the most dangerous feats of his career, but he did not permit these to interfere with his crusade. Everywhere he was escaping from strait-

jackets in mid air and diving into rivers handcuffed, chained, and heavily weighted, or encased in securely nailed packing-cases. At Los Angeles occurred the escape from a ring of fire, when enthusiastic Boy Scouts almost roasted him alive. In the diary such feats are briefly noted amidst entries like: "Took photos at spirit church. A peculiar test." "Lectured at Elder's Gallery on Spiritualism. Packed them in."

In addition to all these activities he maintained his routine of three shows a day in the theater. He continued to visit insane asylums, taking careful notes on inmates who had been driven mad by the Ouija-board craze or from dabbling overmuch with mediums.

In the spring Houdini threw down his first challenge to the mediums, offering to wager five thousand dollars that he could duplicate any phenomena of alleged spirits. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, on another American lecture tour, was also in the West, and the two reached Denver at the same time. A Denver newspaper published a front-page screamer to the effect that Sir Arthur on arrival had announced that he would materialize the spirit of his own mother to win Houdini's five thousand dollars. Sir Arthur rushed to the theater where Houdini was playing, to deny the report, and he stayed to see his friend's act. The next evening Mrs. Houdini reciprocated by attending Sir Arthur's lecture on spiritualism. "Bess goes to Doyle lecture," reads the diary. "Says mine is more interesting and convincing, but I told her, yes, Doyle is a historical character and his word goes far, in fact much further than

mine." Apparently Mrs. Houdini peeked at this modest entry, for below, in her hand, is written an emphatic: "I don't think.—B. H."

Naturally newspapers through the West played up Doyle and Houdini as the storm-centers of the spiritualist controversy. They were not infrequently misquoted in their references to each other, and despite their friendly respect, they were drawn into several misunderstandings. "Our relations are certainly curious and likely to be more so," Sir Arthur wrote to his antagonist on one occasion, "for as long as you attack what I *know* from experience to be true I have no alternative but to attack you in turn. How long a private friendship can survive such an ordeal, I do not know." This, however, was a low point of pessimism. The men had too much affection for each other to break, and their friendship survived to the end.

As early as 1921 the *Scientific American* began to betray an interest in the work of mediums, which appeared to grow more sympathetic as the months wore on. At the beginning of 1923 this publication announced a prize of twenty-five hundred dollars for the first person to produce a psychic photograph under test conditions, and another similar prize for the first person to produce "a visible psychic manifestation under test conditions to the full satisfaction of the judges." The committee named to make the tests consisted of Dr. William McDougall, professor of psychology at Harvard; Dr. Daniel Frisk Comstock, formerly of Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Dr. Walter Franklin Prince, principal research officer of

the Society for Psychical Research; Dr. Hereward Carrington, psychic investigator; and Houdini. J. Malcolm Bird of the staff of the *Scientific American* acted as secretary for the committee.

Several mediums came forward as contestants for the prize during the first few months, while Houdini was on tour in the West, but their phenomena proved anything but mystifying to the other members of the committee. Then there appeared before them a young Neapolitan by the name of Nino Pecoraro, who evoked the spirit of Palladino to perform the familiar repertoire of ghostly pranks. Pecoraro proved more convincing than his predecessors. The assembled scientific gentlemen carefully tied him up with sixty or seventy yards of rope, and still, in the dark room, Palladino's capable ghost continued to ring bells, jingle tambourines, rap on the table, and give other manifestations of the dignity of existence in the higher spheres. Houdini, playing in Little Rock, Arkansas, in December, 1923, received a telegram from Mr. O. D. Munn, the proprietor of the magazine, asking him to return for an observation of this plausible medium. Houdini cut his engagements and hopped on a train for New York.

When he arrived and heard the story, he was a bit abrupt with his confreres. "Do you mean to say you tied him with sixty yards of rope in one piece? Don't you know that a rope-tie expert requires slack to free himself, and the longer the rope the more slack? Even a tyro could get his hands loose from sixty yards of rope."

The only member of the committee who was a connoisseur on rope-ties fastened young Pecoraro with several small ropes. Thereafter the members of the committee sat in expectant silence for nearly an hour and a half, but not a bell rang and not a tambourine quivered. The only result was when the ghost of Palladino complained, through Pecoraro's lips, that the young man was uncomfortable. Houdini pointed out to his fellow committeemen that the medium could suffer no discomfort unless he were trying to free himself, in which case the knots were so fastened that they would pull and bind him. He also had a sharp verbal interchange with the ghost of Palladino. A second séance was equally unproductive, and Pecoraro passed ignominiously from view.

Houdini returned to his performances in the West. By this time he was beginning to lecture at churches and at universities on the subject that engrossed him. His first university lecture had been delivered in the fall at the University of Illinois. The professor who presided was apparently somewhat frightened at having a vaudeville showman address the students, for when Houdini appeared he warned him that he was to speak only about five or ten minutes, and when the chairman snapped his fingers that would be the signal to withdraw. The fingers were never snapped. Houdini spoke for an hour. In January, 1923, he addressed the students at the University of Wisconsin, and a week later the students and faculty at Notre Dame.

In February, 1924, when his tour on the circuit closed,

he signed with the Coit-Albee Lyceum to deliver twenty-four lectures on spiritualistic fraud in cities of the Middle West and the South. Without returning to New York he embarked on this enterprise. In some towns he accepted challenges from packing-box firms and the like in order to fill the houses for his serious talks. The current of his life seemed entirely changed. He had become a crusader, sternly battling against a fraud that he conceived as a menace to society. The most highly-paid performer in Big Time, he elected to tour the provinces in a series of one-night stands as a lecturer, at a lecturer's wage. Having won the position of prince of entertainers, some irresistible urge within him now made it impossible for him ever to be merely an entertainer again.

If he ever had time to philosophize about the change, possibly he viewed it with mixed feelings. Already the crusading spirit had exacted so much from him in time and energy that stretches of days and weeks had been taken from work that meant money and comfort for later days. He had no savings. His collections, his fads, his benefactions, had always swallowed his surplus earnings as they came in.

On April 6, 1924, back in New York, he wrote in his diary: "I am fifty years of age today and can't believe it. But I am!! But not in body and far from it in mind. I believe if I live I'll be better, body and mind, than ever before, and more capable of making a living in my old age. But I must provide NOW!"

XXII

HOUDINI raced through his fiftieth spring with youthful zest and his usual manifold activities.

He was unanimously elected president of the Society of American Magicians for the eighth successive year. He purchased at auction the major part of the collection of letters of leading figures of the drama, from the estate of William Winter, the venerable dramatic critic. The letters included originals from Edwin Booth, Lily Langtry, Charles Coghlan, Mary Anderson, Modjeska, Irving, Ellen Terry, Ada Rehan. He held a public debate on spiritualism at St. Mark's-in-the-Bouwerie with Dr. Prince, his associate on the committee of the *Scientific American*. He made a trip to Boston to purchase a library on spiritualism. While exploring these books, stored away in the garret of a private house, he became so absorbed and excited that he kept a taxicab waiting for three hours. The next day he had a long conference with Anna Eva Fay, the medium who had fooled Crookes, Tyndall, and others. Speaking as one artist to another, Anna frankly and appreciatively described her methods of hoaxing the scientific mind. She told Houdini that never at any time had she pretended to believe in spiritualism.

Houdini's book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, was published and contributed to the general uproar about apparitions and their performances. The leading organs in the vaudeville world, in their reviews and editorial

comments, noted that Houdini's activities had swung far beyond the range of a public entertainer.

Meanwhile, in his warfare against fraud, Houdini ran across a young Spaniard, Joaquin Maria Argamasilla, who boasted of the possession of supernormal vision, or "X-ray eyes," which enabled him to see through metal. Señor Argamasilla carried imposing credentials testifying to his powers, signed by noted European scientists, including one Nobel prize winner, Professor Richet. His manager was seeking recognition at the booking offices.

Señor Argamasilla apparently could read the time of day through a hunting-case watch furnished by any spectator. He also gave demonstrations of reading handwriting through closed metal boxes. In the latter feat he used either a silver box, or a steel box with sliding covers of various metals.

In observing this young man reading the time of day through a gold watch-cover, Houdini noticed that the young man moved the watch about for a period, resting it in the palm of his hand, ostensibly to focus his X-ray glance. Houdini, with a theory that the Spaniard slipped the watch open during this manipulation, tested him by producing a watch that could not be opened by the usual simple pressure on the stem. The X-ray eyes failed on that occasion. At a later demonstration Houdini maneuvered to stand behind the Spaniard while he was operating with another watch and saw him open and close the timepiece so deftly that none of the other spectators suspected him.

Houdini then studied the boxes which yielded their enclosed messages to the X-ray eyes. In the case of neither, he discovered, was it necessary to have metal-piercing vision to read a card placed in the box. The silver casket had a trick fastening in the shape of a hasp and turn-buckle which could be manipulated to afford a glimpse of the interior. For the other box a flexible cover served the same purpose and even permitted the card to be slipped out. The young Spaniard manipulated the boxes so cleverly that the average spectator saw no opportunity for deception, and the performer's naïve and innocent manner furthered the hoax.

Houdini liked Argamasilla personally. He admired his technique and his clever apparatus. He begged the young man to drop his supernormal claims and present his specialty as a trick. Argamasilla, however, was apparently advised to defy the fraud-hunter. He agreed to a public test before Houdini, but when Houdini appeared with a metal box with the lid soldered and wired in place, he refused to operate. Houdini then published a full explanation of the young man's trick, with diagrams, and the X-ray eyes vanished from the happy realm of Big Time.

Bigger game loomed ahead. This was no less a person than "Margery," "the most brilliant star in the firmament of alleged physical mediumship that America has seen in fifty years." [1] Margery had started her performances in 1923, but she first came prominently to Houdini's atten-

[1] Walter Franklin Prince in *American Journal of Psychology*, July, 1926.

tion with the appearance of two intriguing articles about her from the pen of J. Malcolm Bird, associate editor of the *Scientific American*, in the summer of 1924. The author was reticent about the identity of this lady, though her name had been revealed in the newspapers of Boston. According to him, she was a person of "refinement and culture." She was averse to publicity and had no desire to compete for a money prize. Her psychic control purported to be "Walter," the spirit of her brother, whose identity was carefully concealed by Mr. Bird under the name of "Chester." "Walter" was a musical spirit, who was accustomed to herald his arrival by whistling a bar from "Souvenir." "At ten o'clock would be heard what 'Walter' called his 'wee watchie'—the gentle striking of a psychic clock heard as from a distance. At the end his departure was signalized by 'taps' on a psychic bugle." "Walter" was versatile. He not only displayed his presence by tipping a table and rapping on it; he started a victrola, stopped and started a grandfather's clock, dragged a piano stool across the room, and even transported a live pigeon into the room without smashing a window pane or displacing any bricks in the wall.

Mr. Bird admitted in his article that this promising psychic was in line to gain the prize. He reiterated this to Houdini later, expressing the opinion that Margery was "50 to 60 per cent. genuine."

When Houdini was called into consultation in the case, in the latter part of June, from fifty to sixty séances had been held under the auspices of the zealous Mr. Bird.

The medium lived in Boston. She was Mrs. Mina Crandon, wife of Dr. L. R. G. Crandon, a surgeon. It appeared that Mr. Bird, and also Dr. Carrington of the committee, had stayed at Boston as guests of the Crandons for considerable periods. Dr. Carrington seemed as sympathetic as Mr. Bird. He had been Palladino's manager and had a soft place, in his heart at least, for dark-room miracles.

Houdini, with these facts in mind, arranged to go to Boston with Mr. Munn at an early date. They arrived on July 23. Mr. Bird had preceded them and was ensconced as a guest at the Crandon home. Houdini and Mr. Munn stayed at a hotel.

One of the phenomena that had greatly impressed the visiting intelligentsia was the ringing of a bell. The bell was incased in a wooden box containing dry batteries which rang it whenever a flap in the cover was pressed down. The box would be placed near the medium, her hands would be held and her feet pressed down on either side, and presently the bell would be rung vigorously, presumably by "Walter." This performance was considered a great triumph for the spirits. It should be added, however, that according to the rules of the game established by "Walter" one of the hand-holders must be Margery's husband.

At Houdini's first séance, held in the Crandon home, July 23, Houdini sat on Mrs. Crandon's left, and Dr. Crandon, as usual, on her right. Mr. Bird was seated so that his hand was placed over the clasped hands of the medium and her husband. The bell box was placed be-

tween Houdini's feet. He held the medium's left hand, and his right leg was pressed against her left ankle. Behind the medium's chair stood a cabinet-screen, and beside her, on the floor to the left, was a megaphone to facilitate spirit conversations. The room was completely dark, as it was during every séance attended by Houdini.

Houdini had prepared for the occasion by wearing a tight rubber bandage on his right leg just below the knee throughout the day. When this was removed in the evening, it left the leg painfully tender and extraordinarily sensitive to tactile sensations. While in his position as a "control" he rolled up his trouser-leg above the knee.

"As the séance progressed," he wrote, "I could distinctly feel her ankle slowly and spasmodically sliding as it pressed against mine while she gained space to raise her foot off the floor and touch the top of the box. To the ordinary sense of touch the contact would seem the same while this was being done. At times she would say:

" 'Just press hard against my ankle so that you can see that my ankle is there,' and as she pressed I could feel her gain another half-inch.

"When she had finally maneuvered her foot around to a point where she could get at the top of the box [Fig. 1], the bell-ringing began and I *positively felt* the tendons of her leg flex and tighten as she repeatedly touched the ringing apparatus. There is no question in my mind about it. *She did this.* Then, when the ringing was over, I plainly *felt her leg slide back* into its original position with her foot on the floor beside mine."

During a rest-period "Walter" asked that an illuminated plaque be brought into the room. The hunt for this released the medium's right hand and foot, and while these were free, "Walter" suddenly called for "control" [Fig. 2]. What followed, in Houdini's language, was this:

FIG. 1

"Mrs. Crandon placed her right hand in mine and gave me to understand that I had both her hands. Bird was requested to stand in the doorway, but without any warning, before he could obey, the cabinet was thrown over backward violently. *The medium then gave me her right foot also, saying:*

" 'You have now both hands and both feet.'

"Then 'Walter' called out:

"'The megaphone is in the air. Have Houdini tell me where to throw it.'

"'Toward me,' I replied, and in an instant it fell at my feet.

"The way she did these two tricks is as follows: When Bird left the room it freed her right foot and hand. With her right hand she tilted the corner of the cabinet enough

FIG. 2

to get her free foot under it, then picking up the megaphone she placed it on her head dunce-cap fashion [Fig. 3]. Then she threw the cabinet over with her right foot. As she did so I distinctly felt her body give and sway as though she had made a vigorous lunge. As soon as this was done, 'Walter' called for 'better control' and she gave me her right foot. Then she simply jerked her head, causing the megaphone to fall at my feet. Of course, with the megaphone on her head it was easy and simple for her to ask me or any one else to hold both of her feet

and also her hands, and still she could snap the megaphone off her head in any direction requested."

The next night the séance was held at Dr. Comstock's hotel. The circle formed around a table, with Houdini holding Mrs. Crandon's left hand, his foot pressed down on hers. With his index finger on her pulse, he used the "touch and tactics" system to detect her movements. In Houdini's words:

FIG. 3

"Before going to the séance, Mr. O. D. Munn and I had determined to explore things to our satisfaction and had arranged a code of signals. At the séance he sat at my left in the circle, I holding his right hand. At the first movement of the table I pushed his hand under it and let go and began groping around with my left hand. As I did so I felt Mrs. Crandon's head at the edge of the table pushing it up and forward until the box with the bell had slipped off to the floor. I reached over and whispered to Mr. O. D. Munn what I had detected. Then to check up

and to assure myself of the deception I reached out again into the dark, and *she ran her head directly against my outstretched fingers.* I do not think she was more surprised than I. She then said something about losing hairpins and after the séance her hair was loosened. This was done for effect and to offset my discovery.

"While I knew she was still using her head, I pulled Mr. O. D. Munn's ear to my lips again and whispered:

" 'Will I denounce and expose her now?'

" 'You had better wait a while,' he replied.

" 'Now is the time,' I urged.

" 'No, better not for a while,' he answered.

"After this demonstration the bell-ringing test was gone through again. The box was placed between my feet with her ankle against my right foot like the night before. I had rolled my trousers up as on the previous evening. She began with exactly the same tactics, but nothing happened. Finally she said to me:

" 'You have garters on, haven't you?'

" 'Yes,' I replied.

" 'Well, the buckle hurts me,' she said.

"I reached down to undo the garter and found that the buckle had caught her stocking so fast that it prevented her from sliding her ankle enough to get room to tap the bell. After I took the garter off, she was able to reach the bell as she had on the previous night. When the spirit asked Mr. O. D. Munn how many times he wanted the bell rung and Mr. Munn said 'five,' she made so bold a sliding movement with her ankle to reach the box that I

think she was under the impression that I was badly fooled or was going to help her like the others. After the five taps on the bell she slid her foot back into position on the floor beside mine."

After this session the members of the committee met and discussed Houdini's findings. It was decided to return to New York and arrange for further sittings without informing Mrs. Crandon that Houdini had seen through her. This precaution of secrecy, however, was apparently futile, as Houdini states that Mr. Bird subsequently divulged the committee's secret to Mrs. Crandon.

It would appear that these two sessions were unproductive, as far as the spirits were concerned, but some interested person apparently whispered a different story to the newspaper men, for the Boston papers had an outburst of headlines such as "Boston Medium Baffles Experts," "Houdini the Magician Stumped," "Psychic Power of Margery Established Beyond Question." Since under the rules the members of the committee were barred from talking to the press, there was no contradiction of these handsome mendacities.

Between the two series of sittings, persons who talked with Houdini found him for once with a single-track mind. Professors Brander Matthews and G. C. D. Odell called at his home one evening to look over some of his dramatic collections in connection with Dr. Odell's forthcoming book on the drama. They found a singularly unreceptive host, because Houdini soon switched the conversation to bogus spirits and their work and could not be

diverted from the subject. The visitors left with the impression of having talked with an evangelist of rare powers, completely possessed by his mission. They had a fascinating evening, though wholly unproductive for their purpose.

For the next séances Houdini constructed for the committee a cabinet-box to restrain the medium, in which she could sit comfortably with her head protruding. Two holes in the sides served as openings for her arms. With this restraint, the committee returned to the Boston front on August 25. Mr. Bird was banished from the sittings. Mrs. Crandon was encased in the box, and the bell box was placed on a table just in front of her cabinet. After a time the bell rang with vigor. Apparently the spirits had scored. It developed, however, that the lid of the cabinet, which was fastened by two thin strips of brass, had been broken after the lights went out, and under the circumstances it was possible that the medium had leaned forward and rung the bell with her head. Houdini asserted that Mrs. Crandon had done exactly that, after breaking the cover. "Walter" insisted that he had forced the cabinet-box.

On the following evening the cover of the cabinet-box was fastened with heavy staples and padlocks. Houdini, on guard lest the medium squeeze some implement through the head-hole, and, by holding it in her mouth, manage to press down the flap of the bell box on the table before her, was careful to hold one of her hands and repeatedly cautioned Dr. Prince to be sure to retain

the other. The bell remained silent. After a time, however, "Walter" broke in sharply and accused Houdini or his assistant of hiding a ruler in the cabinet to discredit the medium. In a violent outburst the spirit, who apparently did not share his sister's refinement, bestowed a vulgar and emphatic epithet [2] on Houdini and bade him "get the hell out of here and never come back." The séance broke up in confusion. A new two-foot ruler which folded to a six-inch length was indeed found in the cabinet. Houdini charged that Mrs. Crandon had brought it in order to ring the bell but had elected to accuse him of concealing it after she found that the control of her hands made its use impossible. The session was a blank.

On the following night a séance was held at which Mrs. Crandon's feet were locked in a wooden box control provided by Dr. Comstock. At the end of an hour, when no manifestations occurred, the committee withdrew. "Fraud my verdict," wrote Houdini in his diary.[3] Mr. Munn, hastening back to New York, stopped the presses of the September issue of the *Scientific American* and eliminated an article by Mr. Bird further extolling Margery's psychic powers and mundane charms.

Because of the persistently false reports in the press, the November issue of the magazine appeared with the preliminary findings of four members of the committee. Dr. Prince and Dr. Carrington stated that there had been no proof of supernormal powers by Mrs. Crandon. Hou-

[2] Houdini, with characteristically naïve delicacy, described "Walter's" incivility thus: "He said my father was not married to my mother."

[3] Some time later he added: "She sure was resourceful and unscrupulous."

N.Y. Hippodrome

opened with magic Box
How she rang bell while in
the box + had her hands
held. Had committe
blindfolded into Black-
Velvet Hoods

1st. Bursting open lids of Box
before it was locked.

2 ringing the bell-box.

3 showing how she could
have used the 2 first rule
by forcing it by her neck to
depress bell box causing it to
ring. She sure was
resourceful! + unscrupulous

From the diary for February 1, 1925

dini asserted that "everything that took place at the séances I attended was a deliberate and conscious fraud." Only Dr. Carrington, who, according to Dr. Prince, had been a guest at the Crandon home for forty-four days and nights, averred that "genuine supernormal phenomena have occurred." Dr. McDougall had not yet produced a report.

Meanwhile from coast to coast Margery was elbowing first-class murder mysteries and bootleg scandals on the front pages of the newspapers. "Constant Reader," "Pro Bono Publico," and a thousand others were taking their pens in hand to excoriate Margery and the spooks or to defend them. Houdini, on a lecture tour to the Pacific and back, denounced Margery and reproduced her manifestations before applauding crowds.

There was no lack of fuel for the flames of spiritualistic controversy. On December 18, Dr. Crandon issued a statement accusing the committee of trickery. Houdini, back in New York, in reply offered to pay five thousand dollars to charity if he could not discover and duplicate any effects Margery could produce in any public hall. On December 19 a long news story of mysterious origin appeared in the Boston press to the effect that Houdini had been removed from the committee, which would shortly award the prize to Margery. This evoked denials from both Mr. Munn and Houdini. The next day Margery's former husband, a grocer, leaped into the fray with the statement that the story of her psychic powers was "nothing but bunk." On the same date the papers stated that

"Walter" had announced on the authority of the spirit world that Houdini would die within the year. Houdini hastily called the world to witness that if he died within the year the fact was a mere coincidence. Engaging stories swept through the tabloids to the effect that certain mediums of Boston spent their evenings sticking pins through wax images to cause Houdini's death. On December 22 it was reported in Boston that J. F. Rinn, magician, stated that "spiritualism is all bunk and I back my statement with ten thousand dollars for any one who will prove the contrary." Dr. Carrington wrote to the press that Houdini had no standing as a psychic. On Christmas morning Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, stirred by the controversy, sat down in his study in England and penned a long and heated defense of Margery (whom he had never seen). This indorsement burst on Boston's front pages about a month later.

Houdini managed to take the time to give his annual show before the convicts in Sing Sing prison on Christmas Eve. They nailed him in a packing-case they had prepared, and in twelve minutes he stood outside and the case was still soundly nailed together. Then to their awe and delight, he produced personal spirit messages from notorious departed inmates of Sing Sing and from Ben Franklin and performed diverse "spirit" manifestations. On January 2, 1925, he appeared in Boston and dramatically deposited five thousand dollars in bonds at the mayor's office to be paid over to Margery or any other medium who would perform in public any mystery which he could

not satisfactorily expose and explain. On that day and the next he gave exhibitions before crowded houses showing how Margery caused "spirits" to ring bells, tip tables, float megaphones, write messages, etc.

Meanwhile Dr. Crandon, having received the courtesy of the columns of the *Scientific American*, launched in the January issue another hot attack on the committee. Bird made a similar attack. Messrs. Prince, Comstock, and McDougall replied in a public statement.

On February 1, Boston was startled by a horrendous story in the *Herald* purporting to set forth the discoveries of Mr. E. C. Dingwall, research officer of the English Society for Psychical Research, who had come over to test Margery. According to the *Herald*, Mr. Dingwall saw "a cold, clammy dark brown or grayish ectoplasmic substance that exuded from the medium's mouth and head and slowly extended itself to ring bells and flip papers on the floor." Apparently these goings-on were somewhat exaggerated, for in Mr. Dingwall's final report he stated that he could not affirm his "belief in the authenticity of the phenomena."

The great Margery fracas raged unabated into the spring of 1925. On February 4, Dr. Crandon announced that no more séances would be held for the committee of the *Scientific American*. Eight days later the committeemen submitted their final report, declaring that Margery had not qualified for the prize. Dr. McDougall joined his colleagues in stating that all the phenomena he saw were produced by natural means, and Dr. Prince, amplify-

ing his former report, stated that he "could write a chapter of indications which, in the absence of contravening proof, seem to tell the story of normal and deceptive production." Dr. Crandon immediately denounced the report as dishonest, and Dr. Carrington, Margery's sole champion on the committee, presently issued a broadside asserting that Margery was genuine and so was Palladino as well. The Society for Psychical Research went on record against the committee, and early in March Dr. Prince resigned, the amiable Mr. Bird immediately replacing him as chief investigator. Houdini thereupon had his name erased from the membership rolls. Mr. Bird subsequently produced a volume of five hundred and eighteen pages extolling Margery.

Two further investigations were made. A committee of Harvard professors and graduate students, some of whom had been impressed by phenomena seen at the Crandon home, undertook a circle for study. The mystery of ectoplasm seemed to engage their attention particularly. In several sessions they discovered that the medium was using both hands and feet at periods when "Walter" alone was supposed to be engaged in activity, and a microscopic study of substances touched by the ectoplasm gave evidence that it, too, was a worldly substance. "The group is in absolute agreement," they reported, "that the only conclusion possible to them is that trickery accounted for all the phenomena; that the only possible difference of opinion in the group is to what extent the trickery is unconscious."

Dr. McDougall also continued to look into ectoplasm, attending a number of the Dingwall sittings. Certain photographs of the "ectoplasmic hand," said to be produced by "Walter," seemed to bear a suspicious resemblance to lung tissue. Not until many months later could he secure prints of the hand to submit them to experts. His colleagues in physiology and biology at Harvard and other biologists and physicians supported him in stating that the ectoplasm was undoubtedly the lung tissue of an animal.

Thus it would seem a fair conclusion that in the Margery case Houdini's quick wit and his magician's intuition were eventually vindicated by the scientific investigators. Margery slipped off the front pages into the limbo of forgotten things, and "Walter's" sprightly pranks ceased to be a moot question.

XXIII

SHORTLY after his exposure of Margery, Houdini, in the full heat of the crusading spirit, turned his back on the emoluments and comforts of Big Time and set out on a lecturing trip for two months, carrying his message to the Pacific Coast and back. The tour was much more exacting than that of a star of stars on one of the major circuits. It meant one-night stands and quick, long jumps from place to place through the western hinterland. Entries in the diary indicate the strenuous railway routine. After lecturing at Laramie, Wyoming, he left at 2:50 A.M. for Pocatello, Idaho. Arriving at Pocatello at 6 P.M. that evening, he gave his talk and demonstrations and picked up a train at 1:15 A.M. for Oakland, California, changing at Ogden at 5:50 A.M. If he regretted the comparatively leisurely existence of the itinerant in vaudeville, the diary gives no indication of it.

Crusader Houdini by no means impaired the powers of Houdini the showman. More and more the lecture merged into a fascinating performance in which Houdini managed to give the spectators all the thrills involved in spooky manifestations at a highly developed séance and at the same time revealed to them how the thing was done. Members of a committee from the audience, invited on the stage, would have their heads covered with black velvet hoods to simulate the darkness of the séance room. Hand in hand they would form the mystic semicircle,

facing the audience, about a table, Houdini's neighbors on either side holding his hands and pressing their feet firmly on his. Presently they would hear the "spirits" rapping sharply on the table, that piece of furniture would buck and rear, about them would be heard the ringing of bells and the tinkling of tambourines, while various objects seemed to be floating in the air about their heads. Some of the committeemen even felt their chairs jerked off the floor and themselves levitated into the air in defiance of all laws of gravity. Or perhaps one of them, unhooded for the moment, would write a question on a slate, tying it against another slate so that Houdini could not see what was written. When the slates were held under the table, by the writer and Houdini, the scratching of a spectral pencil was plainly heard, and when they were reopened, lo, the "spirits" had written a relevant reply.

To the hooded committeemen the phenomena were weirdly inexplicable. Those who sat on either side of Houdini were willing to swear that he could not move either hands or feet. The man who wrote on the slate was certain that it was never out of his control. On the other hand the audience, sitting in front, had a clear view of the processes of the bogus spirits at every turn. They saw Houdini slip his foot out of a trick shoe and sock, leaving the shoe still firmly held by his unsuspecting neighbor. They saw him ring the bell and shake the tambourine with his toes. They saw him, by a subterfuge, free his hand and with hand and foot make the table jump about, and saw him perform other spirit pranks. They saw how he

simulated the scratching of the spirit pencil with his finger nail. They saw him shift the slates and finally substitute slates on which a hidden confederate, not at all resembling an apparition, had written an answer to the question submitted. They saw how, by the performer's subtle suggestion, plus some sleight of hand, the hooded dupes were made to believe that various objects were floating about their heads or that they themselves were being raised into the air.

It was all a great show, wholly novel, uproariously successful, and everywhere it served Houdini's purpose of striking a mighty blow at fraud. The newspaper repercussions were notable, and behind him he left a trail of newspaper crusades against local mediums.

By the time Houdini returned to New York in December, he was ready to try out his novelty in the vaudeville houses. At the beginning of 1925, opening a two weeks' engagement at the Hippodrome, he made his venture. Using the cabinet-box he had prepared for Margery, he showed how, as he understood it, that versatile young woman bamboozled the scientists. To this he added the rest of his spooky repertoire and appended the impressive feats of the Davenport Brothers and a feature of detailing to the audience the principal news items they would find in their newspapers the next morning. A medium in Paris once won fame and fortune by anticipating the news in this fashion. His spirit reporters were the wonder of a continent, though a private wire to the stage from a

friendly newspaper office was his real secret. Houdini did the trick with the coöperation of the New York *World*, and his audiences seemed none the less impressed because he revealed the trick.

If either Houdini or the management had any doubts about the introduction of a controversial subject into a house of entertainment, the conduct of the patrons dispelled their uneasiness immediately. The whole audience joined in the ghost-hunt with the gusto of a group of hospital surgeons at a kidney operation. The critics called this "the biggest novelty that has ever played vaudeville," "the most remarkable and interesting act of Houdini's career." The showman had effected a successful merger with the crusader.

Of course the showman did not permit the crusader to overdo it. Not every performance was devoted to exposing fraud, and there were revivals of old favorites, the water-torture cell, the needle trick, the escape from the strait-jacket, and in particular the time-honored trunk trick which the Houdinis had performed together in the museums and beer halls thirty years before. This hardy perennial seemed to invoke more enthusiasm than any of the other feats. Houdini, before he was fastened in the trunk, was not only handcuffed and fettered and tied, but was sealed in a huge paper bag. Almost as quickly as one could snap one's fingers the exchange would be made, and when the trunk was unstrapped and unlocked and the paper bag cut open, Mrs. Houdini would be found

securely fastened in his place. Houdini's incursions among the spirits obviously had lost him nothing in the art of showmanship.

The fortnight engagement at the Hippodrome was extended to six weeks. During the last two weeks, Houdini doubled at an earlier show at the newly-opened Albee Theater in Brooklyn, with a full strenuous forty minutes at each place. Each night, in the interval between the two performances, he had bestowed on him the highest privilege granted by the City of New York. A convoy of motorcycle policemen escorted his car from the Albee to the Hippodrome, through the five or six miles of city streets, with all traffic rules and signals waived in his favor. The metropolis commonly accords this freedom of the traffic only to visiting potentates of the highest grade. "Sure an exciting week—plenty of work," the diary reads.

One day Houdini got into a dispute with Mr. Ralph Pulitzer, proprietor of the New York *World*, about reports cabled from London to the effect that Professor Gilbert Murray under certain conditions had given some remarkable exhibitions of thought transference in tests conducted by Earl Balfour. Mr. Pulitzer believed the tests indicated supernormal power. Houdini declared that he could duplicate the demonstrations by natural means. Accordingly, at the close of the Hippodrome engagement in February, Mr. Pulitzer, Mr. Bernard M. Baruch, several of the editors of *The World*, and other guests assembled at Houdini's home to put him through his paces as a mind-reader.

As far as possible the conditions of the Balfour tests were followed, plus such precautions as the investigators devised. The guests assembled in the Houdini sitting-room, while Houdini was locked in a small bedroom two floors above, with a committeeman guarding the door. Downstairs the committee, seated in a close circle, selected several test thoughts. According to the Balfour formula, these were written down and repeated in whispers three times about the circle. Houdini's wife and brother were in the room, but were not permitted to repeat the words.

Of three test thoughts Houdini failed to get the first. He got the second on a second trial. In the case of the third, Dr. Edward J. Kempf, psychiatrist, selected "Buffalo Bill's monument in Wyoming by Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney." Houdini described Buffalo Bill and his activities without giving his name.

In another test Houdini stripped in the upper chamber and was locked in a cabinet placed on two chairs, which was examined and guarded by Mr. Pulitzer and Mr. Walter Lippmann. The group downstairs thought of "Mrs. John Barrymore's portrait done by Zuloaga." As soon as he came down, Houdini said, "You have been thinking of Mrs. John Barrymore." He did not get the idea of a portrait.

As the test thoughts were of such a nature as to exclude guesses, Houdini's high percentage of hits caused much speculation among the guests. He refused to explain his method, beyond characterizing it as scientific trickery. It remains a mystery. However, it is fair to explain that

the Houdini home in New York was a trick house from cellar to roof. It had an intricate nerve-system of signaling apparatus. Chair arms, table legs, window sills, paneling, and trim were filled with traps and secret receptacles. Such a house never before existed outside of fairyland. In that magician's lair Houdini could apparently twist natural laws into grotesque perversions, stand reality on its head, and otherwise throw the senses of ordinary mortals into confusion. The fact that he and Mrs. Houdini could communicate by slight changes of the position of feet, hands, and facial muscles was an added factor in the equation.

A cross-country tour of five months followed the engagement at the Hippodrome, with the crusader "packing them in" everywhere on the road. The old outdoor stunts, such as being flung into harbors nailed in a packing-box or escaping from a strait-jacket while suspended above a crowded street, were now discarded in favor of a new spectacle, that of medium-baiting. Houdini would send advance agents to each city to pose as clients and learn the methods of some conspicuous medium. Then, donning some disguise, and accompanied by a newspaper man, and a detective or the public prosecutor, he would attend a séance in person and give the *coup de grâce*. Nobody enjoyed these dramatic exposures more than Houdini, and the attendant publicity made every press agent along the route burn with envy. Houdini combined the methods of Sherlock Holmes and Old Sleuth, retaining the best features of both. He commonly went

to the séances disguised as a feeble old man with a white beard. Sometimes he added a hump on his back, which lent an air of pathos and was a convenient hiding-place for a camera or other paraphernalia.

In Cleveland, on the evening of March 10, after spending a fruitful afternoon at the State Hospital and Insane Asylum, Houdini attended a séance at the home of George Renner, who did a thriving trade in the spook business. At Renner's summons, apparently any ghost desired by a true believer would report present for a fee of one dollar and would deliver a message through one of the megaphones which the medium kept at hand for this purpose. At the séance where Houdini and his confederates seated themselves among the regular customers, after a time megaphones seemed to float about the room, eventually drifting to the table in front of Renner. Houdini stole from the mystic circle and unostentatiously smeared the mouthpieces of the megaphones with lampblack. When the spirits began delivering, a few minutes later, Houdini turned on his flashlight, revealing Renner with his hands, lips, and face looking as if he had tried rather crudely to make up for a black-face comedy. The dénouement may be quoted from the signed narrative of reporter Louis B. Seltzer, which pranced across the front page of the Cleveland *Press* the next day, under the caption "Houdini Traps 'Spirit' Medium." Mr. Seltzer, *con moto:*

" 'Mr. Renner, you are a fraud.'

"I heard Houdini say that.

"In one hand he held a pocket flashlight.

"He was pointing his finger at Renner.

" 'Your hands are full of lampblack, Mr. Renner,' said the master magician. 'The trumpets also are full of lampblack. That's where you got it on your hands.'

"Swiftly I jumped up and flashed on the lights.

"Prosecutor Stanton stepped over and snatched from Renner's hands a handkerchief with which the medium was wiping the lampblack smear from his chin and hands.

"The medium reached into his pockets.

"He threw out the three one-dollar bills I had handed him.

" 'No, you don't, Mr. Renner,' said Stanton. 'We saw you take the money. You may as well put it back now.' . . .

"Renner, perplexed and angered, shouted out:

" 'I have been a medium for forty years and I have never been exposed.'

" 'Well,' said Houdini, 'you are now.'

"Perspiration gleamed on Renner's forehead.

" 'Who are you?' he demanded.

" 'My name, Mr. Renner, is Houdini,' said the magician.

"Renner half rose in his chair, and slumped back into it speechless."

Renner was promptly removed to the calaboose, and Houdini rushed to the theater just in time to take his turn in the show. Persons in the front row probably observed that the performer's finger nails were extremely

untidy. They were covered with lampblack which he had had no opportunity to clean away.

A week later Renner's trial opened, with Houdini as the chief witness. Houdini missed a matinée, but the general business of the house did not suffer from his performance in the court room.

For six years Houdini had been gunning on the trail of Pierre Keeler of Lily Dale, New York, known as the last of the slate writers. Finally, in 1925, Houdini's niece, Miss Julia Sawyer, succeeded in obtaining from Keeler messages from a deceased sister who had never existed and from the spirits of two other relatives who were still alive. The fee was three dollars. Miss Sawyer on this occasion mentioned that her wealthy valetudinarian Uncle Bill, with his nurse, was waiting for her at the railway station, and Keeler went out to greet this aged Croesus. After some brief interchanges, Uncle Bill suddenly whisked off his long white beard, revealing Houdini, who cried, "I've got you, Keeler." He reintroduced his nurse, who proved to be a New York newspaper man. The distinguished slate writer was greatly upset: "Houdini, let me down easy," he said, according to Houdini. "We're both in the same line."

In New York, disguised with his whiskers and his hump, and accompanied by two detectives and a reporter, Houdini attended a session at the W. T. Stead Memorial Center to get a message from a mythical dead son. Mrs. Cecil Cooke, the pastor, a trumpet medium, apparently had no great difficulty in summoning the aged customer's

offspring from the shades for a fee of one dollar. As Houdini professed a slight deafness, the apparition had to speak up. After the spirit had chatted a while through his megaphone, Houdini suddenly turned a flashlight on the medium, revealing her with the megaphone held to her own lips. Mrs. Cooke was so amazed that she held the pose for several seconds. Then she fell to the floor exclaiming that the light had killed her, while the true believers, milling about Houdini, cried: "You've killed our medie!" The pastor, still protesting that she had been killed, was removed to the police station by the detectives.

These were typical episodes of the great crusade. They took much time and energy, and for the most part the regular sitters were ungrateful. Sometimes they fought and scratched members of the exposing parties. The raids were of great value, however, as dramatic demonstrations, and each one dealt a heavy blow at the local spook-mongers.

Some of the mediums made reprisals. At various times their "spirits" discovered and told the world that Houdini was a drunkard, a drug addict, that he kept a secret harem, that he had sold his soul to the devil. Some mediums resorted to the courts. The Rev. Frederick A. Wiggin of Boston, who acted as entrepreneur for spirits who read sealed messages, produced for Miss Sawyer a message from her mother, who was at home placidly engaged in her housework at the time. Houdini denounced the Rev. Mr. Wiggin from the stage, and the medium brought suit against him for one hundred thousand

dollars. This and a number of other actions brought by mediums, claiming in the aggregate a king's ransom, were still pending when Houdini met with his fatal accident.

The tour was strenuous, and Houdini needed his splendid physique to get through the day-to-day work. That he was feeling the strain is evidenced by clippings of a sort new to him, pasted on the pages of his diary. These include a sentimental editorial homily entitled "A Crime to Grow Old," pseudo-scientific fragments to the effect that a man is physically and mentally at his best after fifty, verses extolling maturity and preaching the gospel of "carrying on." At Indianapolis, April 1, 1925, he wrote in the diary: "I phoned through to New York early in the morning, about 1 A.M., to speak to grandma [his wife's mother] on her birthday. Bess and I congratulated her on phone. Her birthdays will be fewer. So will mine."

A little later, on his own birthday, this entry appears: "My 51st Birthday!!! Gee, I don't feel like it. Can't believe I am so old, I feel so young—only I feel tired." And below: "I buy Bess a dress for my Birthday, as it is Easter Sunday."

His friends noticed that he looked tired. After he wound up his long tour in mid-June, 1925, with two more weeks at the New York Hippodrome, his attorney, Mr. Ernst, persuaded him to rent a house for the summer at Glen Head, Long Island, in the hope that he would take a long vacation, away from the city. The house was crowded all summer with invited relatives of Houdini

and Mrs. Houdini, but through the entire season Houdini slept in it only about ten nights. The art of resting was not his, and besides, he was too busy. A score of pressing tasks held him in New York. Several times a week he lectured on mediumistic and other frauds at the Police Academy, and sometimes he led or instigated raids. He was planning the details of the greater crusade for the next year, receiving reports from his agents, engaging new ones. He was conducting a score of controversies and personally looking after a correspondence that had attained the volume of that of a first-grade statesman. His literary labors included the editing of a weekly newspaper supplement on the art of magic. Finally, he was preparing to put on his own show in the fall, the preliminary work for which involved him in a thousand details.

Houdini had many reasons for wishing to book his own show, not the least of them being his desire to carry his crusade into places where big time had no bookings. He also felt that he could make his exposures more effective by placing them in a carefully balanced program designed to throw them into relief. The showman, the magician, and the crusader collaborated amiably in building up the program. If the crusader had the best place, both the showman and the magician had plenty of scope for their efforts.

Doubtless it was highly pleasing to Houdini to have a full opportunity at last for the more common art of legerdemain, which was such a fascinating study for him. His program opened with a dozen or more of the pretty

feats of the conjurer, involving intricacies of dexterity and misdirection, which his success as a specialist in escapes had crowded out of his bills, except for brief intervals, for a quarter of a century. Ever since, as a boy of seven, he had gazed in rapt attention at the mysteriarch of the backwoods circus producing balls and ribbons and rabbits from a borrowed plug hat, this subtle wizardry had had a charm for him. Now at last he could fashion a whole act of little feats of wonder, transformations and vanishings involving the use of birds and small animals and various colored objects dear to the magic-monger. His researches into the work of the older masters gave him a fine background, and he brought to his performance rare inventiveness, dexterity, and showmanship.

Yet the magic, the illusions, and the escapes were but a sugar coating for that portion of the show devoted to the exposure of mediums. On every program Houdini printed a list of the rewards offered to any medium who could demonstrate psychic powers: $10,000 by Mr. J. F. Rinn, $5,000 by the *Scientific American*, $10,000 by the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. To this he added his own offer of $10,000.

The new show started in the fall and was a great success. Houdini employed a dozen or more agents who moved ahead of him and investigated the work of the mediums in the towns he was to visit. One of his investigators, a young woman who went under the name of Frances Raud, was ordained as a clergyman six times in the course of her efforts. Curiously enough, none of the

mediums with psychic powers ever attached any suspicious significance to the juxtaposition of the letters in the name, Rev. F. Raud. Mrs. Houdini also did much detective work among the mediums, though not as an advance agent. She went to hundreds of séances and obtained scores of messages from her dead children who never existed and from her mother who was very much alive, but never did any of the spirit guides discover to their psychics the fact that the sitter was the wife of their arch-enemy. Not infrequently the mediums spoke of Houdini, usually in terms of objurgation. Mrs. Houdini heard one medium in Boston, who revealed the future for twenty-five cents, praise her husband highly: "He is doing a great work. He is going after the frauds. And we, the true workers of God, will work on, as he will weed out the frauds." Another ghost-doctor who gave a performance of "speaking with the dead," combined with some exceedingly crude conjuring, at a local theater in Dallas, Texas, for an entrance fee of fifteen cents, advanced a novel theory about Houdini: "I'll tell you a secret about that guy Houdini," he said. "Do you know where he gets his money? Women—women. He's got four or five rich women keeping him." Mrs. Houdini and the Houdini agents present shrieked with laughter.

In fact, most of the investigators had a grand time at the séances. When the Houdinis were in New York, the spirit hunts became family parties in which all the young women in the family participated, and sometimes a dozen

Houdini agents would go severally or in pairs to a single séance.

When John Slater brought his spirits who answered sealed questions to Carnegie Hall, Houdini sat in a box with Dr. A. M. Wilson, editor of the *Sphinx*, and Mrs. Houdini and other members of "the gang," as they called themselves, were scattered through the balcony. After a time Slater announced that his spirit guide would answer a question put forth by Beatrice Rahner: "That's Bess. It's her maiden name," Houdini exclaimed excitedly to Dr. Wilson. Mrs. Houdini had written: "Will my trip be successful and does my sweetheart love me?" "Your trip will be successful and will be your first trip to California," Slater said. Mrs. Houdini had visited California a dozen times. He added: "My guide says that your sweetheart is not quite as much in love with you as you are with him." At this there were a series of giggles from the members of the Houdini "gang" in the gallery, and Dr. Wilson guffawed.

By the time Houdini came to a town, he was fully primed with information on the local spirit mart. The mediums, inspired by an awesome curiosity, would flock to his show, and Houdini's spotters would duly note the numbers of their seats. In the course of his exposure, Houdini would take up the local professors by name, telling of the bogus "messages" each had given to his agents. Suddenly, across the darkened house, the beam of his flashlight would swing full in the face of one of the

mediums present. "There is Mrs. Blank, who deals in bogus spirits at such an address," he would say. "Yesterday afternoon for two dollars she gave my agent messages from the spirit of her deceased child and her deceased husband. My agent has never been married nor had a child." If the medium denied the accusation, Houdini turned a second flashlight on his agent. If the medium was a hardy-minded person and still persisted in denying that she had ever entertained such a sitter, Houdini would point out that his agent had left a mark in indelible pencil on one or two places in the medium's sitting-room—on a panel beside the south window, and at the foot of the Rogers group—and he was willing to have a committee from the audience accompany the medium home to verify or disprove this. By the time Houdini got that far, the medium usually made a hurried exit. In the rare cases in which the committee investigated, they always found the marks.

Houdini for a time adopted the method of posting in the theater the names of the mediums whose practices he intended to expose. His list in Chicago included that of Herbert O. Breadlove, "renowned trance speaker, medium, and healer." The "Rev. F. Raud" and another young woman employed by Houdini had investigated Breadlove and had played their parts so well that when Breadlove summoned Houdini to court for "interfering with his business," the unsuspecting medium asked the two girls to accompany him to bear witness to his supernatural powers. A neat little comedy was thus on the cards, but

unfortunately the judge threw the case out of court before any witnesses could be called.

Each evening Houdini drew the attention of all mediums in his audience to his ten-thousand-dollar challenge for a real spirit manifestation, pointing out that the money was on deposit at the box office. There were no acceptances. On some occasions he called for the readers of sealed messages and offered a thousand dollars for each answer to five questions he had written in sealed envelopes. Once a woman came forward, announcing herself as a medium, and said she would give the answers. The reply to the first question, she declared, was: "Is it possible?" The question proved to be: "What is the name of the man who taught me the East Indian needle trick?" Her second answer was: "Yes." The question was: "Where did I meet the chief of police of Pittsburgh last summer?" After that the medium had enough.

The crusade was going tremendously. By the end of 1925, newspapers in many cities had joined in the popular medium-chase in the interests of morality and circulation. The *Graphic* in New York, the *American* in Chicago, and the *Record* in Philadelphia were running daily articles by Houdini telling of his adventures among the spook-mongers.

In Buffalo a shrewd and attractive young woman medium coolly invited Houdini into a partnership. If he would manage her and authenticate her seership, she declared, they could easily clean up a hundred thousand

dollars each annually. "I told her I'd think it over!" reads the diary. "What a fool to think I'd be crooked."

Houdini continued his practice of tracking bogus spirits to their lairs and exposing the mediums before admiring reporters and policemen. In February, 1926, he descended on a meeting of the higher lights of spiritualism at the Broad Street Theater in Philadelphia. After Mr. J. Malcolm Bird had made a fiery speech extolling Margery's tricks, from ectoplasm to her whistling spirit guide, Houdini vaulted on the stage and talked the spirit voices to a standstill. In March his agents, through a clever ruse, secured a flashlight photograph of Minnie Reichert of Chicago, in the very act of delivering a bogus spirit message through her trumpet. The investigators were badly scratched as they fought their way out, but the photograph hit the front pages the next day. In June, Houdini bearded John Slater, "the millionaire medium," at a meeting of the Pennsylvania State Spiritualist Association at Lu Lu Temple, Philadelphia. Slater had announced that he would give five thousand dollars to any one who could prove that his alleged messages from the dead were not genuine. Houdini, accompanied by a committee of newspaper men, insisted on taking up the challenge, and in addition offered to give ten thousand dollars to charity if Slater could read five messages the crusader had written. The chairman of the meeting refused to deliver Houdini's challenge to Slater. That worthy kept in the background, and neither he nor his five thousand dollars was seen during the entire evening.

Early in 1926, Houdini made a pilgrimage to Washington to enlist the aid of President Coolidge in his campaign "to abolish the criminal practices of spirit mediums and other charlatans who rob and cheat grief-stricken people with alleged messages from the dead." Houdini asserted that there were about two hundred mediums in Washington who operated without restraint because the District of Columbia had no law, such as those of most large cities, making it a crime to accept money for purveying synthetic messages from the shades.

As a result of Houdini's effort, Senator Copeland and Congressman Bloom introduced a joint resolution in Congress designed to curb the evil. Hearings were held by appropriate committees of both Senate and House, and the record of the latter was printed in a booklet of one hundred and seventy pages.

At times during the hearings, it was difficult to understand that they were an inquiry by a committee of Congress and not by a committee of Houdini. The crusader dominated the sessions. He described in detail his adventures with conspicuous spook-mongers. He declared that he had personally investigated three hundred self-declared psychics and found not a single one genuine. He called his agents, who testified to their discoveries. He produced Dr. Remigius Weiss of Philadelphia, who related how he had caught Slade and other mediums in frauds. He presented affidavits from Mrs. Anna Clark Benninghofen, a former trumpet expert, high up in the mediumistic cult, who had reformed and renounced spook-

ery after a career of thirty years. With a dramatic flourish he flung down ten thousand dollars in bills before the chairman of the committee and offered it to any medium who dared come forward and attempt any manifestation which he could not explain and duplicate by natural means. He gave the law-makers a demonstration of the pranks of the spirits and finally he amazed the wife of a Congressman, whom he had never seen before that session, by giving her a number of intimate messages from her deceased relatives who addressed her in their own names. He subsequently explained to the bewildered lady how he had picked up his information.

The sessions of the committee were crowded with the clairvoyants, astrologists, fortune-tellers, and other psychic professors of Washington and near-by points, all in a state of combustive indignation. Houdini had prepared for them by having his agents, led by "Rev. F. Raud," look into their activities before the hearings. From one leading light, "Rev. F. Raud," who, be it recalled, was a spinster, had secured for a fee of two dollars messages from the spirit of a husband and a fifteen-year-old daughter. From another professor, for ten dollars, she secured news of the shade of a husband who died of cancer and obtained a diverting horoscope which included an impending legacy. From still another, for a fee of one dollar, she obtained the information that her husband was in Ohio or Pennsylvania "with another woman." "Rev. F. Raud" testified that some of the mediumistic leaders had

boasted that many Senators and Congressmen were addicts to spirit messages and that their psychic ministrations had even been sought by Mrs. Harding while she was in the White House.

Revelations of the Houdini espionage apparently disturbed greatly the assembled mediums, but they put up a brave show. Houdini was denounced as an atheist, as mentally deranged, as the secret agent of a Jewish conspiracy to undermine the Christian faith, as a tool of the Pope. One susceptible Congressman questioned him at great length as to whether he was not really a native of Allahabad, or at least whether "the original Houdini" had not stepped out of that Arabian Nights locality.

At one stage of the proceedings Houdini found it necessary to repel an accusation that he was a brutal and insane person. The record reads:

"MR. HOUDINI. My character has been assailed. I would like to have as witness here Mrs. Houdini. Step this way, Mrs. Houdini, I want the chairman to see you. On June 22 I will have been married thirty-two years to this girl. She has starved and starred with me. . . . Outside of my great mother, Mrs. Houdini has been my greatest friend. Have I shown traces of being crazy, unless it was about you?

"MRS. HOUDINI. No.

"MR. HOUDINI. Am I brutal to you, or vile?

"MRS. HOUDINI. No.

"MR. HOUDINI. Am I a good boy?

"MRS. HOUDINI. Yes.

"MR. HOUDINI. Thank you, Mrs. Houdini. [Applause.]"

The assembled psychics protested severally the genuineness of their spirits and claimed for them a sort of religious extraterritoriality. A number of respectable minions of the civil service testified that they derived much comfort from communing with the spooks at the end of the daily seven-hour grind in Uncle Sam's bureaus. The wife of a Senator asserted that the élite of Washington spent happy hours in her salon while "conversing with their invisible dear ones" via a trance medium, that the spirit of her father had assisted her in recovering a violin that had been lost for years, and that spirit guides could pick the winners at the races.

On the record, Houdini had the better of the argument. The members of the committees appeared to think so, but in Congress discretion is the better part of valor, and the bill was never reported.

Back in New York, at the end of his strenuous season, Houdini was moved to undertake what was probably the most difficult physical feat of his career. He found the metropolis intrigued by the exploits of one Rahmen Bey, an alleged Egyptian fakir,[1] who professed to a supernormal power whereby he could suspend animation in his own body. At a local theater, every day (orchestra seats two dollars and a half), Rahmen Bey, in his self-imposed cataleptic trance, permitted himself to be shut

[1] After Houdini exposed Rahmen Bey, the *Brooklyn Eagle* sent an Egyptian to interview him in his native tongue. The interview was a failure. The fakir did not understand the language.

in an air-tight coffin for ten minutes or more, whereafter he would emerge alive and bowing. The trances appeared to baffle explanation by interested physicians and physiologists, and the feats were giving quite a lift to the stock of local spookery.

Houdini at once determined to spike the claim to supernatural powers. He immediately went into active practice in slow breathing and staying under water. After a few weeks he announced that he could keep alive in an air-tight coffin by conserving oxygen longer than the fakir could carry on in a trance with the aid of his djinns. In tests Rahmen Bey's best trance in the coffin was clocked at nineteen minutes. Houdini predicted that he could do an hour. The fakir was in his twenties and Houdini at the high blood-pressure age of fifty-two.

The trial was made before a committee of medical men in the swimming pool of the Hotel Shelton on August 5. The magician was enclosed in a metal coffin in which the physicians estimated there was air space for forty-two normal breaths. They thought he might make that do for fifteen minutes at most.

"If I die," remarked Houdini, before the lid was hermetically sealed, "it will be the will of God and my own foolishness. I am going to prove that the copybook maxims are wrong when they say that a man can live but three minutes without air—and I shall not pretend to be in a cataleptic state either."

The coffin was sealed and lowered into the pool, where relays of swimmers took turns in holding it under water.

Not until an hour and thirty-one minutes had elapsed did Houdini signal to be released. He was in a state of great exhaustion, with blood pressure, respiration, and temperature all abnormal, but these symptoms passed in a short time. There had been no trickery about the test, and no possibility of trickery.

Houdini arrived home from the Shelton in the latter part of the afternoon. He found his mother-in-law sitting in the basement taking her afternoon coffee, German fashion.

"Harry, have a cup of coffee with me. It will refresh you," she said.

"No, thanks, grandma." He seldom took even coffee as a stimulant.

She studied his face anxiously. "You look tired, Harry. Won't you go upstairs and lie down for a while? It will do you good."

Houdini jumped up restlessly. "If I'm tired, the best way to get rid of it is to work it off. I'll run down to the gymnasium, grandma."

He went to the Y.M.C.A. of which he was a member and spent an hour or so playing handball, tossing the medicine ball, and sprinting on the running-track.

XXIV

THE vigor and sincerity with which Houdini conducted his crusade had won for him an unusually large measure of public esteem. Newspapers hailed him as one of the country's most valued citizens. He had come a long distance from the days of obscurity when Dime Museum Harry sat up nights inventing new tricks to eke out a bare existence. Yet, though his scope and purpose had expanded to larger horizons, he still burned the midnight oil over his work, and his inventiveness and curiosity were unabated. When he reopened with his own show in the fall of 1926, he was full of fresh projects for the future, which included a more comprehensive plan of attack against fraud.

His show had been a profitable adventure, in spite of the heavy collateral expenses involved in the great crusade. He would continue to clean up with that for another full year, including a tidy run on Broadway. After that he felt that he could afford to let down a bit, to devote more time to lectures, to write more books, to organize his crusade more along the lines of effective legal action.

He needed the opportunity to let down. At a time of life when most men have definitely settled into middle age and are complacently contemplating their growing waistlines, Houdini was working harder than ever, over longer hours, and incidentally employing a physical agility that would shame an athlete in his twenties. His daily rou-

tine involved, instead of the thirty or forty minutes of a vaudeville turn, a full two and a half hours on the stage, most of that period consumed with feats that strained his physique to the utmost. Both Houdini and his wife were commonly at the theater from 10:30 o'clock in the morning, arranging the properties for the performance. Their work-day ended toward midnight. In addition, Houdini personally conducted a traveling corps of investigators, went about bagging conspicuous mediums and flinging some into the arms of the law, lectured at churches, civic organizations, and colleges, and turned out a mass of propaganda articles for newspapers and magazines. For the first time in thirty years the diary became virtually all blank pages. There was no time for it.

In his scheme for the future, one project which he had for some years been nurturing in his mind loomed large. This was the establishment of a University of Magic in which he would give to a younger generation the benefit of his skill, inventiveness, and research. In long sessions with his friend Dr. A. M. Wilson, he had even worked out a tentative curriculum under the following heads:

Magic: An Art; a Science
History of Magic
Philosophy of Magic
Psychology of Magic
Ethics of Magic
Preparation
Presentation
Advertising
Showmanship

As a preliminary to this venture into the educational field, he planned to take courses in English at the summer school of Columbia University after the close of his season in 1927. Though he had become one of the most conspicuous figures in American life, he apparently felt no embarrassment at such a public acknowledgment of the defects in his education. He was aware of his cultural handicaps for the career of writer and public speaker, and he adopted a direct method for seeking a remedy.

While his program for 1927 included going to school like a boy, it also embraced the presentation of a new feat that no conjurer had performed before. This was to have himself, on the stage, frozen into a block of ice, and to escape from this arctic restraint in full view of the audience. He had been working on this feature for five years, ever since the filming of his picture, "The Man From Beyond," in 1921. In the screen drama Houdini, the hero, is discovered by arctic travelers who chop him out of an ice-block in which he is supposed to have been locked in a state of suspended animation for a century. Before the movie camera a dummy was used in the cake of ice, but thereafter Houdini kept up a restless investigation for a method of being frozen in person and adapting the stunt for the stage. At last the problems of quick refrigeration and of insulation were moving toward solution, and he expected to introduce his novelty during 1927.

With these enterprises safely planned for the future, he began his routine of production in the fall of 1926.

The season opened with high promise. As a conjurer

and as a showman, Houdini seemed to surpass himself. In the propagandist portion of his show, the manner in which he made his moral crusade serve as an absorbing entertainment was an example of rare art.

A series of mishaps soon began. Toward the close of their engagement in Providence, Rhode Island, early in October, Mrs. Houdini was stricken with ptomaine poisoning. A trained nurse was called in, but on Friday, October 7, Mrs. Houdini's condition was so bad that her husband insisted on sitting up all night with her himself. On Saturday she was slightly improved. It was the last day of the run, and it was midnight before Houdini finished supervising the packing of the paraphernalia for Albany, where they were to open Monday night. He had arranged to have Mrs. Houdini go direct to Albany with the nurse, and shortly after midnight he left in a day coach for New York, where he had a number of business appointments for Sunday. The train was not an express, and the journey lasted until morning.

All the way to New York he was busy conferring with some of his associates, and he had appointments from the moment of his arrival through the whole day. At 6 P.M. he called at the home of his attorney, Mr. Ernst, for a conference on some legal matters. The Ernst family had gone to the country for the day and had not yet returned; so Houdini went to the living-room and lay down on a sofa. It was the first time he had lain down in sixty hours.

In about twenty minutes the family arrived, and Houdini leaped up, all animation. "Aha, Cornelia," he ex-

claimed to Mr. Ernst's daughter, who was then in high school, "my spirits tell me that you have been writing a composition for your class on spiritualism." "How did you know that?" cried the girl. "Aha!" said Houdini, with a mystical gesture into space. As the maid had not conversed with Houdini and there was not a scrap of paper accessible in the apartment to give any hint of the composition, the source of Houdini's knowledge was a matter of bewilderment in the Ernst family for many months, until one day a friend mentioned casually that he had talked with Houdini on the telephone that Sunday morning and had mentioned the bit of writing.

Presently Houdini called up Albany. The nurse said his wife had not suffered from the journey and was resting easily. He told her he would leave for Albany on the 8:30 train. They had supper. Shortly after eight o'clock Mr. Ernst reminded his guest of the train, but Houdini said he had forgotten some additional affairs he must attend to, and he would take a later train. He left the house after eleven, having made an appointment by telephone to see Frank Ducrot, the manufacturer of magical apparatus, at midnight. From Ducrot he went to another manufacturer. He finally left for Albany, again on a day coach, between 3 and 4 A.M., and arrived at 7 A.M. For three nights he had not been in bed.

After a nap lasting about an hour, he was busy through the day with newspaper men and in preparations for an extra stunt in his show, as he expected Governor Smith to attend his opening.

In the evening, in the middle of the program, while his assistants were clamping him down in the stock-like cover of the Chinese Water Torture Cell, Houdini felt one of his ankles snap and a sharp pain shot up his leg. He signaled to be lifted out, and leaning against the cell, asked if there was a doctor in the house. Dr. Hannock, a bone specialist, responded. Making a hasty examination in the wings, he expressed the opinion that it was a bad fracture, how bad he could not tell except with X-ray pictures.

"You will have to go to the hospital at once," the surgeon declared.

"Nothing doing," said Houdini. He waved his hand toward the auditorium, packed from floor to gallery. "They paid their money, and I'll see the show through. Come back stage after the curtain."

He hopped on to the stage and did the needle trick while standing on one foot. Then he went through the difficult series of demonstrations involved in his exposures of mediums. Not a thing was omitted. Almost the entire audience waited at the stage door to cheer him, and the next morning the *Albany Journal* exploited the incident in an editorial entitled "Grit."

At the Memorial Hospital they found that the ankle was broken. The surgeons reset it and advised Houdini to lay off for a week. He insisted on returning to his hotel immediately. There he sat up all night, partly because the pain would not let him rest, partly because he wanted to devise a brace that would permit him to go on with the show the next day.

With the aid of his home-made support he filled his three-day engagement in Albany and moved on to Schenectady for the rest of the week. Finishing there, he jumped to Montreal, where he opened on October 17.

Dr. Hannock, in Albany, had given Houdini a card to a surgeon in Montreal. Houdini went to him for an inspection of the ankle. The surgeon pronounced it well on the road to recovery, and then, his interest aroused, he asked permission to make a complete physical examination of his caller. "You have the most perfect physique I have ever seen," he remarked, after his tests, "and you are in the most perfect physical condition."

On Tuesday Houdini delivered a lecture on spiritualism before the faculty and students of McGill University. One of the students who was taking courses in art made a sketch of the lecturer, and Houdini was so pleased with it that he invited the young man to call at the theater later in the week and do some additional studies.

The student called on Friday morning with a friend. The two sat in Houdini's dressing-room while he lay on a couch, superintending preparations for the performance and reading his large mail. The ankle was still tender, and he did not move about much. Presently a third student came in, and the talk turned to physical endurance. The newcomer asked if it was true that Houdini could withstand heavy blows without inconvenience. The magician replied that he could do so if he had warning to brace himself. He then picked up some letters. The student said something about testing Houdini's ability then and there.

Houdini, absorbed in a letter, was not paying attention and gave an absent-minded reply which the boy interpreted as consent.

The next instant Houdini was startled by receiving a series of sharp blows on the abdomen. At the fourth blow he stopped the young man with a gesture, just as the two other students jumped up in protest.[1]

The boys left shortly afterward, and Houdini finished his mail. He felt some discomfort from the blows and rubbed his abdomen for a few minutes, assuming that the pain was muscular. In the afternoon and evening the pains grew more acute, especially at the end of the evening performance. That night they became so bad that at two o'clock he called Mrs. Houdini and the nurse. Mrs. Houdini massaged him. He could not sleep that night.

[1] In the course of a curious article on Houdini in the *Strand Magazine* for August, 1927, Sir A. Conan Doyle wrote: "There were some remarkable points about his death. The immediate cause would seem to have been a ruptured appendix, though how or why it was ruptured has not been disclosed. The story about a blow from a student is, I believe, apocryphal."

It is a pity that Sir Arthur could not have employed Sherlock Holmes to investigate the matter. Five of the leading surgeons of Detroit deposed, for the life insurace company in which Houdini was insured, that death resulted from a gangrenous appendix caused by a blow. The two students who witnessed the blows made affidavits, and the student who gave the blows admitted them in a signed statement. The Houdini family naturally was somewhat reticent about the matter, to save the young man's feelings. Sir A. Conan Doyle's intimation is that Houdini died as the result of a mediumistic prophecy, from an unaccountable internal rupture. No American life insurance company, however, would be likely to pay out accident insurance on a large scale as a result of death from an ectoplasmic hand. Sherlock Holmes would doubtless have discovered that for four years fraudulent mediums had, with evident pleasure, been predicting Houdini's death. Sooner or later one of them was bound to be right.

Sir Arthur in his article repeats a crude story, circulated among certain "psychics" of Detroit, that Houdini before the end conversed with the spirit of Robert Ingersoll. Houdini was never delirious during his illness, and none of his physicians or attendants heard any spirit conversations.

In the morning he fell into a restless doze, and he nearly fell asleep several times during the matinée. At the close of the performance he complained of acute cramps in the abdomen. He went through with the evening performance with difficulty. During the intermissions he lay on a couch in a cold sweat, and he was unable to dress himself after the show.

That was Saturday night. He had to make a train for Detroit, where the show was due to open the next evening.

Houdini was so ill on the train that his attendants wired for a physician to meet him at the station in the morning. His temperature on arrival was 102. As soon as he reached his hotel in Detroit he had a chill which lasted twenty-five minutes. Several physicians who had been called insisted that he cancel his performance. They said that his symptoms indicated appendicitis, and an immediate operation was imperative. Houdini, informed that the house was sold out, doggedly declared that he must go on. Just before the curtain went up his temperature was taken at 104.

That was a curious performance, with the magician, suave and smiling, forcing himself through his exacting repertoire, while every gesture and motion was a torture. His attendants, in the wings, never took their eyes from him. At the end of the long first act, requiring nearly an hour of work, he fell down on the stage.

At one point on his program Houdini produced four girls from a vacant cabinet. Before the young women appeared he always ran through the cabinet with his arms

outstretched to show that the space was real and that it was empty. That night he was unable to lift his left foot to step into the cabinet. He stood helplessly for a minute or two, and then beckoned to James Collins, his assistant, to help him.

Again, at the end of the show, he had a neat bit of magic, in which he pulled a thousand yards of silk ribbon out of a little glass bowl on a table. He was so weak that he could not even pull out the silk. Again Collins had to finish the trick. At the final curtain he was in a state of complete collapse.

He was removed to Grace Hospital, and the surgeons operated immediately. He wanted to walk from his bed to the operating-room and was angry when the physicians would not permit it. To the stretcher orderlies he remarked: "Say, I can still lick the two of you."

The operating men found a gangrenous appendix, with peritonitis far advanced. So acute was the condition that the doctors agreed he could not live for more than twelve hours.

When he came out of the ether, Houdini grimly set himself to fight. He sensed the doctor's decision, but he was Houdini, he had always got out of everything, and he could recall that doctors had predicted his death before, and he had beaten them. He had beaten them before, and he could beat them again.

So he concentrated his energies to do battle with *streptococcus virulens*. The twelve hours passed, and the hours merged into days. In a medical sense each day was some-

thing of a miracle. Houdini never lost consciousness, and he never ceased fighting. Once a day his wife was carried to his bedside for a brief visit. The sudden catastrophe had smashed her convalescence, and she was in bad shape. Twice a day the physicians posted a bulletin of Houdini's condition which was flashed all over the country—for he had been a "story" for thirty years, and he was a "story" to the end. The bulletins were not very hopeful, for the physicians knew more about the antagonist than did Houdini.

At the end of seven days—it was Sunday, October 31—Houdini said to his brother Theodore, at his bedside: "I'm tired of fighting, Dash. I guess this thing is going to get me."

He lay quiet for a period, his eyes closed. When he reopened them, his wife was leaning over him and her arms were about him. She was crying. He could not speak to her, but his glance rested on her face for a long moment before his head fell back on the pillow.

The Houdini properties had already been shipped back to New York, for it was realized that even if he recovered, that particular tour was ended. Among the paraphernalia was the metal coffin in which Houdini had performed in the Shelton pool his last great feat of endurance. He had used the coffin early in the tour, at Worcester, Massachusetts. By an oversight the packing men had overlooked it at Detroit, and it was still at the theater. His body was placed in it for shipment to New York, and later he was buried in it.

His funeral was held under the auspices of the Elks in New York, and he was buried close to his mother in the family plot at Machpelah Cemetery, Cypress Hills.

Among his personal effects Mrs. Houdini found his last letter:

"Sweetheart, when you read this I shall be dead. Dear Heart, do not grieve; I shall be at rest by the side of my beloved parents, and wait for you always—remember! I loved only two women in my life: my mother and my wife. Yours, in Life, Death, and Ever After."

THE END

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